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Keats, the "Tongueless Nightingale," and the Legacy of Philomela in English Poetry

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Keats, the “Tongueless Nightingale,” and the Legacy of Philomela in English Poetry

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Prerequisite for Honors in English
under the advisement of Alison Hickey

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Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction	
<i>Why Read Keats Through Philomel?</i>	4
Classical Contexts	
<i>Returning to Ovid's Philomela</i>	8
Lines of Influence	
<i>Keats as a Reader of Shakespeare's Philomel in The Eve of St. Agnes</i>	47
Ode to a [Tongueless] Nightingale	
<i>Reading Philomel in Keats' Two Most Famous Odes</i>	66
Bibliography	95

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Introduction

Why Read Keats Through Philomel?

“The characters are Tereus; Procne, the spouse of Tereus; and Philomela, the sister of Procne. Being sent to retrieve Philomela from her father and take her to Procne, Tereus ‘looked at [Philomela], and... Took fire, as ripe grain burns’ and rapes Philomela, and cuts out her tongue so that she cannot name her rapist. While locked away in the woods, Philomela writes (weaves) the event of the impossible and sends her missive to Procne, who, upon reading the deed, wants ‘vengeance.’ She decides to kill her son, Itys, and offer him as a meal to Tereus. When interpreting (seeing) Procne’s deed, Tereus pulls his sword to kill the two sisters, but the gods turn them into birds, with Philomela becoming a nightingale. What remains is thinking, a perpetual rethinking. Of this event.”

– Victor Vitanza, *Chaste Rape: Sexual Violence in Western Thought and Writing* (p. 28, Vitanza’s emphasis)

The above quotation comes from Clemson English Professor Victor Vitanza’s book, *Chaste Rape*, in which he argues that sexual violence against women lies at the dark and repressed core of many, many of Western society’s myths and histories. “Sexual violence is the basement, cellar, cave. It is the *topos*, the foundation, the *Grund*.”¹ When he writes that what remains of the myth of Philomela is “a perpetual *rethinking*,” he suggests that this myth of sexual violence is the primary myth, a foundation that is broached and re-broached, examined and reexamined, written and rewritten in Western literature forever afterward. That the sexual violation and oppression of women is an overarching and underarching, fundamental and inescapable aspect of patriarchy is far larger than Keats, far larger than English poetry, and far, far larger than the scope of this project. That said I leave it here, at the outset, so that the idea can lurk in the basement as it has for me while working on this project, and as many feminists would argue it has for all of Western history.

This thesis has its origins in a much smaller set of questions, in a few “favorite speculations” of mine, as Keats would say, primarily the speculation that there is more to Keats’

¹ Victor J. Vitanza, Preface to *Sexual Violence in Western Thought and Writing: Chaste Rape* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), xxi

(and English poetry's) plurality of nightingales and Philomel allusions than scholarship up to this point has considered. Since Jack Stillinger published his essay "The Hoodwinking of Madeline" in 1961, pointing out the Philomel allusion in Keats' mention of a "tongueless nightingale" in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, not much research has been done on what the implications are for our reading of either *The Eve of St. Agnes* or Keats' most famous nightingale, "Ode to a Nightingale."

Since Stillinger, one scholar who has broached the subject is Beverly Fields, who in 1983 published an article on the subject entitled "Keats and the Tongueless Nightingale: Some Unheard Melodies in 'The Eve of St. Agnes.'" In this essay she begins where Stillinger left off, arguing that Keats was drawn to the Philomel story while writing *The Eve of St. Agnes* because of its theme of what she terms 'fragmentation.' She writes, "Its central image is fragmentation, psychic and physical; the dominant event – the rape and mutilation of Philomel – is elaborated in a number of ways, chiefly by means of the mythopoeic device of splitting off four characters (the fourth is Itylus, the son) from the unified core of a single figure in conflict."² Fields sees this fragmentation in the myth as emblematic of the fragmentation of *The Eve of St. Agnes* and also the psychological fragmentation Keats seems to have felt, in her opinion, while reading and responding to Shakespeare's adaptation of the myth in *Titus Andronicus*. Yet I find Fields' essay frustrating, in part because to me she misses so much of the import and complexity of the Philomela myth and its context in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Equally troubling is her assertion in the conclusion of her essay that Keats symbolically killed the "tongueless nightingale" at the end of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, divorcing it from its association with Philomel when the nightingale reappears in Keats' ode. Always when reading

² Beverly Fields, 'Keats and the Tongueless Nightingale: Some Unheard Melodies in *The Eve of St. Agnes*', *The Wentworth Circle* 14 (1983), 246-50, 247

Keats we remember just how young he was – 25 years – at the time of his death. His life was tragically short. The length of his writing career was even shorter, and the period in which he wrote most of the poems for which he is remembered today was shorter still. Keats began writing *The Eve of St. Agnes* in January of 1819. Only about four and a half months later he composed “Ode to a Nightingale.” How could Philomel’s connection to the nightingale of *St. Agnes* be palpable, significant even to the meaning of the poem, and then be eradicated in “Ode to a Nightingale?” Moreover, if behind Chaucer, Sidney, Shakespeare, Akenside, and even Coleridge’s nightingales was a mention, an implication, an invocation of Philomel, then why not in Keats’ ode?

For much of the history of English literature, all the English poets of the canon were to some degree Classicists. Jonathan Bate has argued that Ovid was Shakespeare’s favorite poet.³ (And Shakespeare, in turn, was the favorite poet of Keats.) Even Keats, who was ridiculed by contemporary critics for his Enfield education and his inability to read Greek, would have read Ovid. Therefore Chapter One, ‘Classical Contexts,’ returns to the Classical myth of Philomela and its context in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to look at significant themes of the story and theories of approaching it. Implied in this chapter is the argument that the stories of the ancients never disappear, rather, as Vitanza writes, we are bound to a “perpetual rethinking” of them. Then in Chapter Two, ‘Lines of Influence,’ I turn to Keats’ “tongueless nightingale” in *The Eve of St. Agnes* and his engagement with Shakespeare’s (as well as Ovid’s) Philomel in that poem. Finally in the third chapter I move to “Ode to a Nightingale” as well as the poem most directly in conversation with it – “Ode on a Grecian Urn” – to consider how Philomel might resurface in this second nightingale of Keats’ and what meaning(s) could be gained by searching for her echoes here.

³ See Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, (Oxford University Press, 1994)

A couple notes: First, concerning Philomela's name, the original Greek is Φιλομήλη (*Philomêlê*), which in Latin became Philomela. In English translations and English verse Philomela is often used, however Philomel is the Anglicized version that Shakespeare used more frequently (though he does use both). Throughout this paper I do sometimes use them interchangeably, though in general I have tried to use 'Philomela' when referring to the character of the Classical myth and 'Philomel' when referring to her within English poetry. I have found it thought-provoking to consider what, if any, the differences between these two characters might be. Second, concerning translations, I have for the most part used George Sandys 1632 translation of *Metamorphoses* because this is the translation Keats most likely would have read. Elsewhere translations are either attributed or my own (which is to say, some adaptive synthesis of translations from various sources and dictionaries).

Classical Contexts

Returning to Ovid's Philomela

The myth of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela first appears, to our knowledge, in a lost tragedy written by Sophocles entitled *Tereus*. Today the play only exists to us in the form of seventeen fragments, none of which retains its known dramatic context.⁴ The exact date of the play's composition also remains unknown. Aristophanes' *Birds*, first performed in 414 BCE, refers to Sophocles' *Tereus* as well as another play on the same subject written by Philocles. In *Birds*, Tereus appears onstage in the form of a hoopoe, comically identifying himself as Sophocles' tragic character of Tereus. A second hoopoe then appears, who Tereus informs us is the son of Philocles' hoopoe. Based on these lines, we can assume that Sophocles' *Tereus* is the original tragedy.⁵

The historian David Fitzpatrick attempted to reconstruct the plot of Sophocles' *Tereus* using translations of the existing fragments as well as an existing hypothesis of the play written in the second or third century CE. In Fitzpatrick's reconstruction, the play commences from the point of Tereus' return from Athens, beginning with a male herald or servant who speaks on behalf of the absent Tereus. Procne then enters accompanied by a chorus Fitzpatrick believes would have comprised Thracian women sympathetic to her. Tereus returns from Athens with the mute Philomela, likely disguised by Tereus as a male servant. Procne's reading of Philomela's tapestry would have taken place onstage, allowing for a reveal scene in which Procne recognizes Philomela's identity and has another male servant confirm Tereus' crimes to her. Following a choral interlude, Procne laments the tragedy that has befallen her and comments on the restricted position of women in ancient society, particularly within marriage. She then plans her revenge on

⁴ David Fitzpatrick, "Reconstructing a Fragmentary Tragedy 2: Sophocles' *Tereus*," *Voices in Classical Reception Studies*; See also S.L. Radt, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, Volume IV2 (Göttingen, 1999).

⁵ Aristophanes, *Birds*, translated by Jeffrey Henderson, 1st Edition (Focus, 1999)

Tereus, and the rest of the story transpires similarly to how we know it today – after learning of the cannibalism, Tereus pursues the sisters. Fitzpatrick believes that a *deus ex machina*, possibly Apollo, would have revealed to the audience that Tereus and the sisters were turned into birds.⁶ Tereus becomes a hoopoe, Procne, a nightingale who sings a perpetual song of mourning for her lost son, and the mute Philomela becomes a swallow, a bird that was believed to lack a song.⁷

While Fitzpatrick allows us to bring considerable skepticism to his reconstruction, he emphasizes what he views as the uncontestable nature of the play as a revenge tragedy. “The one thing I am sure about is that *Tereus* is essentially a revenge play. Any arguments which can be developed about the themes and characters have to revolve around the revenge element.”⁸ The obvious revenge is that which Procne takes against Tereus for his betrayal and his violence toward her sister, an act of revenge that the play seems to condemn for its severity. A fragment that Fitzpatrick attributes to the *deus ex machina* at the play’s conclusion sharply criticizes the women’s extreme revenge. The conclusion of this fragment reads, “Any mortal who is infuriated by his wrongs and applies a medicine that is worse than the disease is a doctor who does not understand the trouble.”⁹ However, to Sophocles’ audience the primary wrong committed in the play would likely not have been the wrong inflicted by Tereus on Procne and Philomela, but rather the wrong he inflicts on the sisters’ father, Pandion, and the patriarchal Athenian family. To Sophocles’ Athenian audience, the Thracians epitomized the Athenian notion of the barbarian other. As barbarians, the Greeks believed Thracian men were exceptionally lustful, a stereotype visible in the character of Tereus.¹⁰ The political tension between Athens and Thrace in the story

⁶ David Fitzpatrick, 'Sophocles' Tereus', *The Classical Quarterly* 51.1 (2001) 90-101.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Fitzpatrick, “Reconstructing a Fragmentary Tragedy 2: Sophocles’ Tereus.”

⁹ Sophocles, edited and translated by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *Sophocles Fragments* (Harvard University Press, 1996). pp. 290–299.

¹⁰ William Anderson, commentary to *Ovid’s Metamorphoses Books 6-10* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), p. 213.

complements the existing tension between the natal and conjugal families. In one fragment, Procne speaks to this conflict, noting that women are “pushed out and sold, away from our paternal gods and from our parents, some to foreign husbands, some to barbarians, some to joyless homes, and some to homes that are opprobrious.”¹¹ Tereus’ crimes realize the anxieties of patriarchal Athenian society. Tragedy falls when Pandion mistakenly trusts the Thracian Tereus and twice leaves one of his daughters in the care of a Barbarian ruler and a Barbarian land. In killing Tereus’ son and exacting her revenge, Procne demonstrates her loyalty to her natal family and city over her conjugal one, an act likely read as justifiable to a (male) Athenian audience.

In the first century BCE, Roman poet Lucius Accius adapted Sophocles’ *Tereus* for the Roman stage. According to Cicero, this tragedy became a favorite of the late Roman republic.¹² However, the version of the myth of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela inherited by English audiences came to the English language undoubtedly by way of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (8 CE), which features in Book 6 a particularly vivid account of the myth. The story of Tereus and Pandion’s daughters would have been well known in Ovid’s time, making additional appearances in texts by Hyginus, Apollodorus, and Antoninus Liberalis.¹³ Yet, Ovid achieved considerable success with his adaptation of the story. He would have been familiar with both Sophocles’ *Tereus* as well as Accius’ adaptation, but he also chose to make several deliberate amendments possibly inspired by Euripides’ *Medea*, which Ovid had famously adapted for the Roman stage.¹⁴

¹¹ Lloyd Jones.

¹² Brooks Otis, *Ovid as An Epic Poet* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) Originally printed in 1970, p. 406.

¹³ Anderson, p. 206.

¹⁴ Anderson p. 205-37; These amendments include further developing Procne’s decision to take revenge on Tereus by killing Itys. Ovid presents Procne considering many different possible revenge plots, some of which parallel revenge plots also pondered and rejected by Medea.

In *Metamorphoses*, the story of Tereus and Pandion's daughters stands apart as one of the most horrific and gruesome, combining the crimes of incest, rape, mutilation, filicide, and cannibalism within one tale. As Ovid recounts it, the myth passes as follows:

Tereus, king of Thrace, lends military assistance to warring Athens at a time when no other city-state comes to their aid. In gratitude, Pandion, king of Athens, gives his eldest daughter, Procne, to Tereus in marriage. At the wedding, Ovid draws our attention to several omens of misfortune. First, we are told that neither Juno, domestic goddess, nor Hymen, god of weddings, nor the three Graces, common attendants to Venus, presides over the marriage. Secondly, "*non pronuba Iuno*" (6.428) echoes a line from Book 4 of *The Aeneid* in which "*pronuba Iuno*" falls on the same ending metrical position. It is in this famous passage from Book 4 that Virgil describes the illegal and ill-fated union of Aeneas and Dido.¹⁵ Thirdly, the Furies light the bridal torches of the ceremony with a flame stolen from a funeral. Nonetheless, five prosperous years pass during which time Procne delivers a healthy son, Itys. A homesick Procne asks Tereus to go on her behalf to Athens and escort her younger sister, Philomela, to Thrace for a visit. Misfortune befalls the family when Tereus first sees Philomela in Athens and is consumed by desire for her. After bringing her to Thrace, Tereus steals her into a hut in the woods where he rapes her. When she threatens to tell of his crime, Tereus cuts out Philomela's tongue, imprisons her in the woods, and tells Procne that Philomela has died in an accident. A year passes, during which time Philomela weaves her story into a tapestry that she sends to Procne, who immediately understands the message and comes to rescue her from the woods and take revenge on Tereus. During the rites of Bacchus (an added element likely original to Ovid's account), Procne manages to disguise Philomela and bring her to the Thracian palace. Here the sisters (acting principally from Procne's direction) decide to kill Itys and feed him to Tereus. At

¹⁵ Anderson, p. 209; See also 4.166 of *Aeneid*.

the banquet, Philomela appears and presents Tereus with the head of Itys. Realizing he has unknowingly ingested his son, Tereus pursues Procne and Philomela, yet before he can slay them all three are transformed into birds: Tereus into a hoopoe, and Procne and Philomela into a swallow and a nightingale. The tale concludes with a return to Pandion, who we learn died early of his sorrow.¹⁶

Looking back to this myth in the context of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and both classicist and feminist scholarship, two subjects emerge as particularly significant to the myth's inherited and evolving meaning. The first is the relationship of Philomela's story to a collection of "divine *amor*" narratives from the earlier books of the poem that establish rape and attempted rape as a central preoccupation of *Metamorphoses*. The prevalence of sexual violence in the text necessitates a consideration of how Ovid presents and engages with sexual violence throughout the work, which in turn gives us a framework with which to compare and approach the sexual violence at the heart of Philomela's story. The second subject of particular significance to the myth's cultural and literary heritage is Philomela's woven response to her abduction and rape and the loss of her tongue. Her tapestry contains and symbolizes much, speaking to themes of articulation, the nature of language (and consequently poetry), women's speech, and resistance.

¹⁶ When speaking of beginnings and conclusions to the tales of *Metamorphoses*, we necessarily run into complication as a consequence of the *carmen perpetuum* form Ovid seeks to achieve in the work. Ovid invites us to think of *Metamorphoses* as one poem that tells many tales, using a variety of transition devices to weave a complete and continuous, even if often shifting and transmuting, *textum*. Generally, we can define the boundaries of a tale based on the characters that appear in the tale, so the account of the myth of Tereus and Pandion's daughters is contained within those lines that refer to the characters of Tereus, Pandion, Procne, and Philomela. Those lines that border the tale can also be read as contributing toward its narrative and meaning. Following Pandion's death, Ovid briefly moves into an account of the rape of Orithyia, granddaughter of Pandion, by the Thracian Boreas, which we could view as a postscript or even a sequel to the tale of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela.

Toward an Understanding of the Ovidian Rape Narrative

In a passage from Book 1 of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid interrupts the story of Mercury killing the hundred-eyed monster, Argus, with a pastoral interlude on the origin of the pan-pipe. Attempting to lull Argus to sleep, Mercury pipes a song and begins to tell Argus the tale of how the reed pipe came to be. The story that follows, the myth of Pan and Syrinx, follows a familiar pattern we come to recognize throughout *Metamorphoses*. It is an iteration of a narrative that echoes over and over again across the text. As Mercury recounts, the tale begins when one day the satyr Pan spies the beautiful nymph Syrinx in the woods and desires to have her. A chase ensues. In fear of losing her maiden virtue, Syrinx runs from Pan toward the riverbank. Pan begins to gain on Syrinx, but at the moment she is just within his grasp, she calls on her sisters, river nymphs, to help her. They respond by transforming the nymph into a patch of hollow reeds growing at the water's edge. Unable to catch and rape Syrinx, Pan sighs in disappointment. As he does so, his breath blows through the reeds, which let out a sound "*tenuem similemque querenti,*" or "low and like a complaint" (1.708). Enchanted with the sound he believes to be the cry of Syrinx, he fashions the reeds into a pipe so that he may have her with him always.

The formula of this tale is well known to Ovid's reader: a male god or mythological character spies a beautiful, virginal girl or nymph and immediately falls in love with her (which is to say, he desires to sleep with her and also to possess her). He starts to woo her, but in fear she begins to flee from him. He chases her and is nearly victorious (which is to say, he attempts to rape her). She prays for rescue in the form of metamorphosis and is transformed. However, he manages to take possession of her in some manner in her new body. The rape is simultaneously both thwarted and realized. Ovid presents us with many variations on this theme, but its narrative formula persists and dominates in the text.

Indeed, the myth of Pan and Syrinx exists within the larger frame story of Io and Jupiter, itself another iteration of the Ovidian rape narrative. Argus was a monster in the command of Juno who out of jealousy sent Argus to guard over Jupiter's love interest, Io. The story goes that one day Jupiter spies the beautiful maiden, Io, and with desire thinks how lucky the man who marries her will be. In his divine power, Jupiter decides to have her for himself. He lures Io to the forest, covers the entire world in a dark cloud to cover up his crime, and rapes her. His possession of Io is nearly fulfilled, except that his wife, Juno, sees the cloud and immediately suspects his infidelity. Jupiter transfigures Io into a white heifer to try to hide what he has done from Juno, but she is not fooled. Cunningly, she asks Jupiter to give the heifer to her as a present, to which Jupiter has little choice but to agree. After some time, during which Ovid recounts in detail Io's suffering while trapped in her new bovine body, Jupiter sends Mercury to slay Argus and finally free Io.

While this story certainly bears unique elements, the interlude of the myth of Pan and Syrinx soon reminds us that the sexual violence of the tale is highly familiar. Indeed, within the world of *Metamorphoses*, narratives of sexual violation are so well known they can serve as lullabies. Only lines into the tale of Pan and Syrinx, Mercury's telling succeeds in putting Argus to sleep. Mercury stops recounting the tale in order to cut off Argus' head and fulfill Jupiter's command, leaving Ovid to finish telling the myth for his reader. As Sarah Brown notes, Argus' boredom as an audience to this myth emphasizes the degree to which violence against women was normalized in Ovid's world, seen as an event not worth our attention.¹⁷ The narrative formula of rape seen in *Metamorphoses* extends far beyond the text itself, speaking to embedded Classical cultural notions about romance, marriage, and the relations of men and women towards each other. When we recognize Ovid as a writer engaging with a cultural narrative tradition, and

¹⁷ Sarah Brown, *Ovid: Myth and Metamorphosis* (Bristol Classical Press, 2005), p. 30.

not as the sole creator of that tradition, the question that emerges from Brown's observation is whether Ovid engages with this tradition merely as a perpetuator of it, or if he introduces a critical perspective to his reader.

Here it is helpful to consider how the gendered power of the gaze operates in Ovid's text. In his tales of divine and human *amor*, the gaze is always the impetus for male erotic desire and male violence. Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking 1975 article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" introduces the theory of male gaze. In this essay, Mulvey draws on Freud's theory of scopophilia and Lacan's writings on the mirror stage to present two dominant modes of viewing film. As she writes, "The first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the construction of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen."¹⁸ This gives way to two modes of seeing, objectification and identification; that is, the spectator might regard a character on the screen as an erotic object, thereby gaining erotic pleasure from the viewing, or he might identify with a character on the screen. Mulvey expands the objectifying power of the gaze to incorporate a gendered analysis, arguing that in film (as in other art forms), Woman acts as an object and Man as the bearer of the look. The assumed male gaze of the spectator acts to eroticize, objectify, and thereby control the female presented on the screen. Simultaneously, this male spectator also regards the male protagonist of the screen through a mode of identification. The male spectator "identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look."¹⁹

¹⁸ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' *Screen* 16.3 (1975), 8-18, 10.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 12.

Applying this theory to the story of Pan and Syrinx, Pan regards Syrinx with an objectifying gaze, viewing her as an erotic spectacle. The external male reader of *Metamorphoses* is then able to project his gaze on Pan's, seeing Syrinx through his perspective. This male reader gains the masculine power of objectification and control over Syrinx. In viewing her as an object, he identifies himself with Pan. In a similar way, the male gaze can also extend to the gaze of Ovid as he writes the text. We do see many moments in *Metamorphoses* in which Ovid identifies with or is complicit with the violent power of a male perspective. For example, in writing of Daphne's beauty in Book 1, Ovid portrays her for his reader as an erotic object, viewing her from the perspective of Apollo, the male deity who will attempt to rape her. In this way, Ovid makes himself (and also his intended reader) complicit in Apollo's possessive regard.

The tone Ovid maintains in the depiction of his stories of gendered violence is often a blend of humor and pathos, pushing the poem in the direction of the tragi-comic. On this spectrum from tragic to comic, we do witness moments in which the poet seems to demonstrate considerable sympathy towards and awareness of the perspective of female characters who occupy the role of victim, such as in his portrayal of Callisto's thoughts following her rape by Jupiter (a passage which Liveley deems "one of the most empathetic and psychologically perceptive accounts of the traumatic aftermath of rape in any work of literature, ancient or modern").²⁰ In passages like these, Ovid divorces himself from the power of the male gaze to imagine the perspective of a woman who lacks power.

The frame device used in the story of Pan and Syrinx might also demonstrate a method through which Ovid introduces a perspective critical of normalized violence. In depicting the story of Pan and Syrinx through an internal narrator who speaks to an internal audience, Ovid

²⁰ Genevieve Liveley, *Ovid's Metamorphoses: A Reader's Guide* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), p. 36.

distances himself from Mercury's presentation of the narrative and Argus' reaction to it. If Argus' boredom alerts us to the pervasiveness of sexual violence toward women in Classical literature and culture, it is Ovid who alerts us of this. Argus belongs to a category of bad audiences in *Metamorphoses* who fail to pay attention to a story being told to them and suffer serious consequences for their disregard. Argus falls asleep listening to Mercury's story and is subsequently beheaded, with his hundred eyes transformed into the spots of a peacock's tail; in Book 2 the raven turns black as a result of ignoring the tale of the crow; and Pentheus does not listen to the stories of Bacchus in Book 3 and thereby meets a horrific death. Whether Ovid is sympathetic to the female victims of *Metamorphoses* or not, and whether he intends for us to read their stories with humor or with pathos, he cautions us to listen well.

The first story of divine *amor* that Ovid presents in the *carmen perpetuum* is the story of Apollo and Daphne from Book 1. As the first of tales employing the structure of the rape narrative, it provides us with a template for reading the many similar narratives of divine *amor* and romantic pursuit that will follow in Books 1-5, as well as the rape of Philomela in Book 6. Ovid begins the tale "*Primus amor Phoebi Daphne*," or "Apollo's first love was Daphne" (1.452). In placing *primus* at the beginning of the line, Ovid emphasizes that the story he is about to tell will introduce a series. Daphne is the first love of Apollo, implying that there will be other loves after her. We meet Daphne as a type, a role, prompted to recognize her iteration not only in Apollo's later loves, but also in the female (and rarely also male) characters pursued as objects of desire who we will meet again and again throughout *Metamorphoses*. This line also signals a shift in the theme and tone of the poem, which before was concerned with epic subjects – such as the creation of the world, the war of the Giants, and Jupiter's flood of the world. We previously saw Apollo, god of poetry, as a monster-slaying hero who kills the giant snake at Delphi. In this

transition, Apollo undergoes a metamorphosis that mirrors the thematic metamorphosis undergone by the poem as whole, as Ovid presents Apollo not as an epic hero but as an elegiac and frustrated lover. The theme of divine love will consume the second half of Book 1 and dominate the remaining stories of the Gods in Books 2-5.

The story commences as Apollo, proud of his victory over the Python, mocks Cupid and questions the efficacy his bow. Cupid responds by flying to the top of Mount Parnassus and shooting two arrows. The first, made of gold (a color associated with passion), strikes Apollo and instantly inflames him with *amor*. The second, made from lead, strikes the nymph Daphne and makes her wish to flee from the very idea of *amor*. In *Amores*, Ovid had claimed that Cupid forced him to abandon writing epic poetry and turn to elegiac love poetry, so we can read a self-echoing impulse in Ovid's choice to make Cupid the reason for Apollo's transformation from epic hero to elegiac lover.²¹ The myth of Apollo and Daphne stages a dichotomy between love elegy, here represented by Cupid, and martial epic, here represented by Apollo, the god who slew the Python. Ironically however, it is Cupid who gets the better of Apollo. As Liveley remarks, "Apollo, the virile hero of martial epic, is penetrated and un-manned by Cupid the playful love-god of erotic elegy."²²

What becomes of note here is that Daphne only acts as an unsuspecting and unlucky victim of circumstance, caught in a fight waged between two masculine deities who compete in an effort to prove their masculine capabilities. Cupid, flying swiftly to the top of Mount Parnassus and striking Apollo and Daphne, proves he possesses the athletic skill typically reserved to the epic hero. The action of sending the arrows is a direct response to Apollo's mocking insult of the (virile) power of Cupid's bow. Daphne is merely an instrument through

²¹ Ibid., p. 26.

²² Ibid.

which Cupid can best Apollo. This recalls Mulvey's theory of gendered gaze, in which the objectification of the woman as erotic object acts as a mechanism through which a male viewer may identify himself as masculine. Borrowing from Lacan, who argued that the Self is constructed through definition and objectification of the 'Other,' Mulvey demonstrates how the male gaze acts to reinforce its own identity as male. Daphne's penetration by Cupid's arrow and subsequent penetration by Apollo's gaze primarily serves to reify Cupid as a powerful masculine subject.

When Apollo sees Daphne in the forest, he is overcome by desire for her: "*Phoebus amat visaeque cupit conubia Daphnes*" (1.490). Seeing her provokes a desire to see further, as Apollo lustily imagines how beautiful the parts of her he cannot see must be. His desire is also a desire to change her, as he imagines, upon seeing her hair down, how her hair might look combed up. Above all, his desire is a desire of possession, leading him to chase her through the woods. Ovid implies that it is Daphne's *forma* – her form or beauty – that provokes Apollo's attempted rape. The poet addresses the girl saying "*votoque tuo tua forma repugnant,*" "your form fights against your desire," highlighting a conflict present within Daphne made more noticeable by the placement of "*tuo tua*" beside each other (1.489). The suggestion being made here is that Daphne is in part complicit in her capture; her *forma* (as judged by Apollo and Ovid) makes her fit as an object of possession, despite her desire to be otherwise.

The tone of the chase is, at least in part, comic. Apollo's un-divine inability to control his desire is meant to amuse us as we witness the monster-slaying god reduced to a pitiable lover. As the pair runs, Apollo is distressed by the tree limbs that scrape Daphne and threaten to scratch her beautiful limbs, so he begs her to slow down, promising that he will as well. What we can read here is that the chase is mock serious – playful, comedic, it is concerned with aesthetics and

takes a certain delight in the pursuit itself. In this passage we have entered a new genre in the poem that stands decidedly in contrast with the epic, a genre of romance and of Roman elegy.

However, this lightheartedness is complicated by the violence embedded in Ovid's depiction of the scene. To describe the chase, he employs a simile of predator and prey, likening Apollo to a hound and Daphne to a hare only inches away from the dog's muzzle:

*ut canis in vacuo leporem cum Gallicus arvo
vidit, et hic praedam pedibus petit, ille salutem
(alter inhaesuro similis iam iamque tenere
sperat et extento stringit vestigia rostro;
alter in ambiguo est, an sit comprehensus, et ipsis
morsibus eripitur tangentiaque ora relinquit):
sic deus et virgo; est hic spe celer, illa timore. (1.533-9)*

Sandys translates this passage into English as:

As when a Hare the speedy Gray-hound spies;
His feet for prey, shee hers for safety plyes;
Now bears he vp; now, now he hopes to fetch her;
And, with his snout extended, straines to catch her:
Not knowing whether caught or no, shee slips
Out of his wide-stretcht jawes, and touching lips.
The God and Virgin in such strife appeare:
He, quickened by his hope; She, by her feare.²³

Ovid pushes his analogy of hound and hare toward a vivid realism, asking us to visualize Daphne as though she were actually slipping from the jaws of a predator. As much as Ovid presents divine *amor* as a comic subject, he undoubtedly also presents it as violent one.

The action reaches its climax with the end of the hunt just within sight. As Apollo begins to gain speed on Daphne, she cries to her father, the river god Peneus, to mar her beauty and change her form. Before she can finish her prayer her metamorphosis into a laurel tree begins, as her feet turn to roots, her arms into branches, and her hair to leaves. Ovid manages to convey the

²³ Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, translated by George Sandys and published as *Ovid's Metamorphosis Englished* (1632) Originally published in 1621, 1.572-9.

precise moment of her metamorphosis, writing “*pes modo tam velox pigris radicibus haeret*,” where the abrupt juxtaposition of “*velox*” beside “*pigris*” demonstrates the sudden transformation of her swift feet into sluggish roots (1.551).

Metamorphosis is of course the central and unifying theme of *Metamorphoses*, and Daphne’s metamorphosis from a nymph into a laurel tree adheres to several general trends seen in Ovid’s depiction of metamorphosis. The poem begins “*In nova fert animus mutatas formas / corpora*,” which is, “My spirit impels me to speak of forms (*formas*, nominative: *forma*) changed into new bodies (*nova corpora*).” This formula requires us to recognize a distinction between *forma* and *corporis*, implying that the *forma* of a character is an inherent and consistent quality, preserved even as the *corporis* changes. Ovid always invites us to recognize a character’s essential *forma* in his or her new body. So, Daphne loses her body as nymph and becomes a tree, but the beautiful *forma* that provoked Apollo’s desire persists even across her metamorphosis. Even as a tree, Daphne continues to provoke Apollo’s desire. Ovid recounts how Apollo feels Daphne’s breasts now encased in bark, embraces her limbs as though they were arms, and kisses her trunk, the wood still shrinking back from his touch:

*hanc quoque Phoebus amat positaque in stipite dextra
sentit adhuc trepidare novo sub cortice pectus
complexusque suis ramos, ut membra, lacertis
oscula dat lingo: refugit tamen oscula lignum.* (1.553-6)

Still Phoebus loves. He handles the new Plant;
And feels her Heart within the bark to pant.
Embrace’t the bole, as he would her have done;
And kiss the boughs: the boughs he kisses shun.²⁴

Ovid emphasizes consistency through change. Although her metamorphosis has prevented Apollo from raping and marrying Daphne, in another sense his rape and possession of her is fulfilled and realized in the text. Instead of kissing the body of a nymph, Apollo kisses the body

²⁴ Sandys, 1.596-9.

of a tree. Instead of recoiling from his touch in the body she knew, Daphne recoils from his touch in the body she now inhabits. Instead of claiming her for his wife, Apollo is able to claim Daphne as his tree. Furthermore, Ovid suggests that Daphne's rape is not only realized in the text, but also realized by the text. In referring to the "*libro*" (nominative: *liber*) or bark that encases Daphne's new body, Ovid also speaks to Daphne's metamorphosis into a character within his text, bound within a *liber*, or book. This suggests that Ovid, like Apollo, has managed to possess Daphne in his own way, forever capturing the beauty of her *forma* within his poetry. The mechanism through which Daphne seeks liberation – her metamorphosis – fails her. Instead, her metamorphosis transforms her from an erotic object of Apollo's violent gaze, to a literary symbol of Apollo's divinity (as the laurel wreath), and also, furthermore, as a literary object of *Metamorphoses*.

Despite the rescue Daphne anticipates through transformation, Ovid never presents metamorphosis as a liberating device. Instead, metamorphosis typically acts as a mechanism for inflicting punishment on a character for his or her misdeeds, or as a mechanism by which a victim's suffering is magnified. In the rape narratives of *Metamorphoses*, the female character's transformation extends her suffering while failing to thwart her possession by her suitor. When *formae* remains consistent across *corpora*, female characters experience pain and discomfort while taking up their new residences in the bodies of plants and animals. When Jupiter transforms Io into a cow following her rape, the reality of the transformation is darkly comic, echoing Ovid's treatment towards the violence of the tale as a whole. In detail, he relates how she must live fully as a cow, wearing a halter around her neck, eating grass and drinking muddy water, and sleeping upon the bare ground. The experience of metamorphosis is frightening and

isolating for her. In one moment Ovid recounts how she visits her father's stream and, seeing her horned image in the water, runs away in horror:

*Venit et ad ripas, ubi ludere saepe solebat,
Inachidas ripas, novaque ut conspexit in unda
cornua, pertimuit seque exsternata refugit.* (1.639-41)

Vnto the bankes of Inachus she stray'd;
Her Fathers banks, where shee so oft had playd:
Beholding in his streame her horned head,
Shee starts; and from her selfe, selfe-frighted, fled.²⁵

In writing "from her selfe, selfe-frighted," Sandys underscores the tragicomic irony of this encounter. The visual image of the heifer scared of its own body provides a comic dimension that exists alongside the pathos we feel for Io as she discovers the familiar suddenly transformed into the unrecognizable. Sandys includes the interjection of "Poor soule!" within his translation, expressing sympathy for the magnification of suffering Io endures in her transfiguration. Io's horror in living as a cow finds an echo in Callisto's sadness and disgust following her own metamorphosis in Book 2. Callisto, like Io, is raped by Jupiter. The jealous Juno then punishes Callisto by turning her into a bear. In the woods, she hides, terrified, from wolves and bears, forgetting that she herself is now a wild animal like them.

The metamorphoses of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela adhere to the example set by these earlier metamorphoses. When each character transforms into a bird, we see that their bodies have changed but their essential characteristics have remained the same. The sword with which Tereus pursues Procne and Philomela becomes the long, sharp beak of the hoopoe, while his crown becomes the distinctive crown of tufted feathers present on the head of the hoopoe. Ovid recounts that as Procne and Philomela flee from Tereus they seem as though they are suspended on wings, and in a sudden and fluid moment of metamorphosis, he clarifies that they were in fact

²⁵ Sandys, 688-91.

suspended on wings: “*Corpora Cecropidum pennis pendere putares: / Pendebant pennis*” (6.667-8). Blood from Itys’ violent murder now stains the plumage of both Procne and Philomela in their bird forms. Once again, *formae* remain consistent across *corpora*. Given the suffering experienced by other characters when they move from a human body into one of an animal, the metamorphoses of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela act as a punishment for their crimes and bring some sense of justice to the tale’s close. However, the transformation of Procne and Philomela also saves them from being slain by Tereus, recalling the function metamorphosis serves in the stories of nymphs like Daphne and Syrinx who escape from corporeal violence by transfiguring into another body. Thus metamorphosis is once again both a mechanism of liberation – an end to violence – as well as the transfiguration of suffering across forms – the continuation of tragedy.

From these tales of divine *amor*, several other points of commonality emerge as significant when compared beside Ovid’s account of the myth of Philomela. The first is Ovid’s recurring placement of these tales in the woods. Daphne is a nymph of the forest, seen and pursued by Apollo in a woodland setting. By metamorphosing into a tree, she embodies that setting, forever arrested within it. Later, Jupiter will carry out his rape of Io by luring her back to that familiar setting, suggesting that she seek shelter from the midday sun in the shade of the forest. Liveley argues that this time and place – mid-day, in the shade of the woods – “will become a *topos* for future rapes and dangerous encounters in the poem.”²⁶ Jupiter carries out the rape of Callisto in the woods, the same place where Juno confines Callisto when she transforms her into a bear. While moving toward the riverbank in its conclusion, the story of Pan and Syrinx also commences in the woods. Similarly, the nymph Salmacis first spies the young Hermaphroditus from a pool in the woods. She then hides behind a tree while she watches Hermaphroditus bathe, before attempting to rape him. By the time in Book 6 that we reach the

²⁶ Liveley, p. 29.

forest where Tereus will rape and mutilate Philomela and hold her captive, Ovid has established the woods as a particularly rich mythical setting. It is a site that he has us return to again and again, a site of romantic pursuit as well as a site of violence and rape, attempted or fulfilled. Ovid describes the setting of Philomela's abduction and rape as "*in stabula alta trahit silvis obscura vetustis*," 'a hut hidden deep within the ancient woods' (6.521). *Vetustis* (ancient) here implies that this is a mythic place, not the woods of the everyday, but rather the woods of ancient times and ancient stories. In bringing Philomela to these woods, Tereus brings us back to the locus of violence and rape within *Metamorphoses*. In fact, violence does not enter into the story of Philomela until the tale moves into the woods, when Tereus brings Philomela off of his ship and into the forest, rather than to the Thracian court. Ovid does not describe Philomela as fearful until the moment when the pair crosses into the woods. It is at this moment that Tereus has disobeyed the charge with which Pandion entrusted Philomela to his care, initiating the unfurling sequence of tragedy and violence.

Another trend apparent in the divine *amor* narratives is their prioritization of the suffering of the father over the suffering of his violated daughter, adhering to themes expressed in Sophocles' *Tereus*. The perspective of the playwright and of the audience of *Tereus* is undoubtedly the perspective of the Athenian male and patriarch. We are invited to watch *Tereus* from the viewpoint of Pandion. Tereus' betrayal – the betrayal for which we as an audience yearn to see revenge – is not a betrayal of Procne or Philomela, but instead of the father who has trusted the foreign king with his property. Pandion gives Tereus his eldest daughter and then temporarily entrusts to him the safety and virginity of his second daughter. In Ovid's account, Pandion grabs the hand of Tereus while weeping profusely and in Sandys' translation begs, "I charge you guard her with a father's love: / And suddenly send back (for all delay / To me is

death).”²⁷ Lines later, as Tereus and Philomela depart for Thrace, Pandion’s sorrow is difficult to bear given that as an audience we know what fate awaits his daughters and grandson: “Scarcely could he bid farewell: sobs so engage / His troubled speech; who dreads his soul’s presage.”²⁸ Unfortunately in giving away his first daughter, Pandion ultimately also loses his second and the lineage he might have gained through either. This is the primary tragedy of *Tereus*, a theme Ovid acknowledges in framing his account around Pandion. In *Metamorphoses*, the story of Tereus begins with Pandion and returns again to conclude with Pandion, “ere half his age was spent...to th’ infernal Shadows sent.”²⁹ Tereus, Procne, and Philomela all transform into birds as a punishment for their crimes. The remaining victim of the tragedy, Ovid reminds us, is Pandion, left to die of his grief.

Similarly, Io’s pain becomes erased and appropriated by the pain of her father. A loyal daughter, Io returns to her father’s land following her rape and metamorphosis into a cow. She attempts to communicate to her father the misfortune that has befallen her, but he cannot recognize her in her bovine form until one day she manages to scratch her name in the dirt for her father to read. In Greek, the characters of her name – *ιω* – signify both her name and an interjection meaning ‘woe,’ or ‘alas,’ thus Io is able to communicate in just these two characters both her real identity and the tragedy of what has happened to her to Inachus, her father.³⁰ Inachus’ response represents an immediate translation and appropriation of what Io has written, as he cries “*me miserum!*” and again “*me miserum!*” (1.651-53). To her father, the misery of Io’s tale belongs not to Io but to himself. Inachus begins to lament at length of his own sorrow. He goes on to cast Io away from his sight, claiming that it would have been more bearable for him to

²⁷ Sandys, 6.548-50.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.559-60.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.737-8.

³⁰ Liveley, p. 30.

have never learned what happened to his daughter than to know as he now does that he shall never have the dynasty from her that he had hoped he would. Such is his grief that he even laments that he is an immortal river god, unable to end his misery through suicide:

I, ignorant, prepar'd thy marriage bed:
My hopes, a Sonne-in-law, and Nephewes fed.
Now, from the Heard, thy issue must descend:
Nor can the length of time my sorrowes end;
Accurst in that a God. Death's sweet reliefe
Hard fates denie to my immortall grieffe.³¹

Once again, the rape of the daughter represents a violation of the father, as the harm encountered does not belong to the daughter but rather to her father; he loses her marital eligibility and the legitimacy of the grandchildren she might have born. The daughter's suffering as well as her speech, her written cry of "ιώ," ultimately reflects back on the father as her proprietor.

When Inachus recognizes Io and launches into his speech of lament, he pauses and acknowledges Io's inability to further converse with him, shouting "Dumbe wretch! (alas) thou canst not make reply."³² This underscores a third trend of the divine *amor* narratives that becomes particularly significant within the tale of Philomela, which is the manner through which these narratives portray the speech of the violated woman. In many of the narratives the nymph becomes unable to speak as a consequence of the metamorphosis she undergoes. Instead, she speaks through a non-lingual mode, a form of speech that is alien, ambiguous, and ripe for misreading and appropriation by the speaking male. Once transformed into a tree, Ovid records that Daphne's head swayed in the breeze ("*factis modo laurea ramis adnuit utque caput visa est agitate cacumen*" 1.566-7). Apollo interprets this motion as a nod of consent, Daphne's willing agreement to be remembered in history as the tree of Apollo and to become an object belonging to him. Similarly, Pan sighs and interprets the sound as it moves through Syrinx's reeds as her

³¹ Sandys, 1.710-15.

³² Ibid., 1.707.

own speech, which provokes him to make her into his instrument, also an eternal object of his possession. In both cases the woman's non-lingual speech is highly ambiguous, fit both for invention and interpretation. Apollo and Pan interpret the woman's signifier as a sign of consent, thereby erasing violence from the narrative. However, Ovid provides ample evidence for an alternative reading in Daphne's motion of *agitasse* and Syrinx's utterance that is *tenuem similemque querenti*, 'low and like a complaint.' Ovid awards us the freedom to read their speech as nonexistent – a mere fantasy of the male's creation – or alternatively, as either a form of consent and thereby submission or a form of *querimonia* – complaint, dissent, and resistance.³³ This kind of enigmatic and non-lingual speech will reemerge in Philomela's story when the silence of the violated woman and the violence by which she was silenced becomes even more pronounced.

In looking to the rape narrative established in the opening books of *Metamorphoses* we see that Ovid's account of the myth of Philomela heavily engages with the earlier divine *amor* tales. In reading Book 6's myth of Philomela against the myths of romantic pursuit from the first books of *Metamorphoses*, many structural and linguistic similarities emerge. In his account of Philomela's rape, Ovid seeks to invoke the narrative template already established in the poem, presenting Philomela's rape and abduction as parallel to the rapes (and attempted rapes) of the nymphs we have previously encountered. The moment that Tereus first sees Philomela in the Athenian court, the text likens the human Philomela to a nymph:

*Ecce venit magno dives Philomela paratu,
Divitior forma, quales audire solemus
Naidas et dryadas mediis incedere silvis,
Si modo des illis cultus similesque paratus.* (6.451-4)

Bright Philomela came in rich array;

³³ The ambiguity of Daphne's "nod" notably disappears in English translations, such as in Sandys' record that "The Laurell all allowes: / In signe whereof her gratefull head shee bowes" (1.610-11).

More rich in beauty. So they vse to say
The stately Naiades, and Dryad's goe
In Syluan shades; were they apparel'd so.³⁴

Here Ovid directly recalls the formula of his earlier stories of divine *amor*, which began with the appearance of a nymph's *forma* before a deity. In her beauty (*forma*), Philomela resembles one of the woodland nymphs "*quales audire solemus*," 'of which we usually hear,' which explicitly invites us to remember the naiads and dryads of which we have already heard in *Metamorphoses*, asking us to visualize Philomela as another iteration of the nymph of the divine *amor* narrative. We meet Philomela as a Daphne, an Io, a Callisto, a Syrinx; while the names and *corpora* of these nymphs keep changing, their disastrously beautiful *formae* recur again and again in the poem, provoking an identical response from the deities and now the mortal men who encounter them. Indeed, when Tereus sets eyes on Philomela's radiant *forma* Ovid employs the same simile used to describe Apollo's sudden desire for Daphne. At the moment that Apollo first sees Daphne in the forest, Ovid likens the onset of his passion to dry leaves and grass catching fire:

*utque leves stipulae demptis adolentur aristis,
ut facibus saepes ardent, quas forte viator
vel nimis admovit vel iam sub luce reliquit,
sic deus in flammis abiit, sic pectore toto
uritur et sterilem sperando nutrit amorem.* (1.492-6)

As stubbles burne,
As hedges into sudden blazes turne,
Fire set too neere, or left by chance behind
By passengers, and scattered with the winde:
So springs he into flames: a fire doth moue
Through all his veins: hope feeds his barren loue.³⁵

Ovid now gives us the same image of Tereus' desire for Philomela:

*Non secus exarsit conspecta virgine Tereus,
Quam si quis canis ignem subponat aristis
Aut frondem positasque cremet faenilibus herbas.* (6.455-7)

³⁴ Sandys, 6.499-502.

³⁵ Ibid., 1.526-31

This sight in Tereus such a burning breeds,
As when we fire a heap of hoary reeds;
Or catching flames to Sun-dry'd stubble thrust.³⁶

In the same way that all of the divine *amor* narratives refer back to the story of Apollo and Daphne as the first of the sequence, so too does the story of Tereus and Philomela. Ovid also uses a similar metaphor of predator and prey to describe the relationship between Tereus and Philomela as he does with Apollo and Daphne. While chasing Daphne, Apollo observes that Daphne runs from him like a lamb from a wolf or like a dove from an eagle, crying “Stay Nymph, I pray thee stay; I am no Foe: / So Lambs from Wolves, Harts fly from Lyons so; So from the Eagle springs the trembling Dove.”³⁷ Likewise, when Tereus brings Philomela into the *stabula*, Ovid recounts “She trembles like a lambe, snatcht from the phangs / Of some fell wolfe; that dreads her former pangs / Or as a doue, who on her feathers beares / Her bloods fresh staines, and late-felt talants feares.”³⁸ Another intratextual echo occurs when Tereus exclaims “*Vicimus!* (‘I have conquered!’ or also simply ‘victory!’) at the moment that he brings Philomela onto his ship and her passage from Athens to Thrace is secured. His cry is nearly identical to the cry made by Salmacis in Book 4 at the moment that she attempts to rape Hermaphroditus. Hidden behind a tree, Salmacis spies on Hermaphroditus. When he undresses and dives into a pool in the forest, she leaps out and dives after him proclaiming “*vicimus et meus est!*” ‘He’s mine!’ (4.356).

At the same time that Ovid works to draw an analogy between the story of Philomela and the earlier stories of divine *amor*, he also uses the story of Philomela to mark a turn in the *carmen perpetuum* that divides the divine *amor* tales from that of Philomela’s tale. He places the

³⁶ Ibid., 6.503-5

³⁷ Ibid., 1.540-2

³⁸ Ibid., 6.577-80

myth of Philomela at the conclusion of Book 6, following the stories of Arachne, Niobe, and Marsyas. Book 6 concludes with the children of Boreas, who board the Argo and set sail across the boundary between Books 6 and 7 and into the tales of Jason, Medea, and the Argonauts. For Ovid, the story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela works as a major transition point within *Metamorphoses* between the previous stories of gods, nymphs, and satyrs and the stories of mortals that are to come. In the same way that the story of Apollo and Daphne acted as a shift in the tone and genre of the poem, morphing the text from epic into elegy and from tales of genesis and war into tales of romantic pursuit, so the story of Tereus and Philomela shifts tone and genre once again. What Ovid now presents is a disturbingly dark iteration of the romantic pursuit narrative. The previously seen tragicomic elements disappear and are replaced with the most gruesome of tragedies. As much Ovid as engages with the divine *amor* framework of the earlier tales, here he departs from it in order to highlight how the world of man differs from the world of the gods. Even if we read the gods, satyrs, and nymphs of the first part of *Metamorphoses* as violent, here we see that humans are capable of a violence and cruelty far baser and more perverted than that of the elegiac realm of the gods.

Indeed, the gods are strikingly absent from this story, particularly when read against the previous tales of *Metamorphoses* that have all featured either god(s) or some form of divine intervention. Ovid likens Philomela to a nymph, and like Daphne and Syrinx she calls upon the gods to save her from the unwanted sexual advances of her pursuer. However unlike Daphne and Syrinx, Philomela is not a nymph but a human woman, and thus when she calls to the gods for help no answer or aid comes for her.³⁹ Anderson argues that in his depiction of Philomela's rape

³⁹ When pursued by Apollo, Daphne prays to her father, a river god, to transform her and thereby prevent her from being raped. Likewise, Syrinx also prays for an identical rescue from her father, also a river god, while pursued by Pan. In a parallel passage, Philomela calls out for help from her sister and her father *Pandion*, whose name means 'all the gods.' Thus Philomela's cry for help is directed both to her father and to the gods – not just one, but to all.

Ovid emphasizes “how little the gods care to listen to an innocent girl’s prayers.”⁴⁰ Ovid might also be said to emphasize more generally how little the gods care to listen to any human prayer, as they do not only ignore Philomela but are strangely absent and silent throughout the story: Venus and Hymen fail to attend Tereus and Procne’s wedding, no god or prophet appears to warn Pandion and prevent Philomela’s journey to Thrace, no power intervenes to save the innocent Itys, and even the metamorphoses of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela lack a *deus ex machina* in Ovid’s account. The tragedy of this tale and its ever accumulating violence is fully human and fully of our world.

Given the humanity of this tale, metamorphosis does not come to save Philomela from a literal rape as it does for Daphne and Syrinx, whose “rapes” are thwarted and instead abstractly and more eloquently fulfilled in the new mythic body they each come to inhabit. These nymphs are spared from actual violence and instead experience what we could consider a metaphysical rape. In contrast, Philomela is denied metamorphosis (until the second time Tereus pursues her); thus her rape is corporeal, human, and violent. Her rape is also an impetus in the plot of the myth for the magnification of violence, unleashing a chain of ever more gruesome events that only finally ends with the sublimation of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela from the corporeal to the abstracted and mythic. It recalls and exceeds the scope of cruelty and suffering seen in Callisto’s story, the divine *amor* tale from Book 2 that testifies to its audience of the gods’ seemingly unending capacity to deny sympathy to the innocent. The nymph Callisto was a favorite of the followers of Diana who stumbles into a plot of unending misfortune when she is raped and impregnated by Jupiter. Once she begins to show signs of the pregnancy, the merciless Diana

When help does not come for her and Tereus succeeds not only in raping her but also in committing further atrocities against her, it is the entirety of the pantheon that fails to intervene on her behalf. A classical audience might have seen the failure of Philomela’s prayer as an expression of anxieties about the power and vulnerability of the human patriarch as opposed to the divine patriarch.

⁴⁰ Anderson, p. 220.

dishonors her and casts her away from the band of virgins; then, when Callisto gives birth to a son, Juno becomes inflamed with jealousy and transforms the traumatized Callisto into a bear forced to live alone as a wild animal. Many years pass, during which time Callisto's son grows into an adult and one day almost accidentally kills his mother, still a bear, until Jupiter intervenes and prevents the tragic murder by transfiguring both mother and son into stars. Juno, still jealous of the "harlot" Callisto, orders that the gods of the sea never allow Callisto and her son to set into their waters, banishing her to the isolation of the high heavens for eternity. One of the central messages this myth communicates is the unbounded capacity of the gods' for inflicting cruelty – a capacity that remains unmatched until Ovid turns toward the world of men and presents yet another story of rape begetting cruelty begetting still further cruelty. Tereus and Philomela demonstrate that the ruthlessness of the gods is ultimately but a shadow of humanity's capacity to both inflict and experience pain.

Theoretical Approaches to Reading (or Viewing) Philomela's Tapestry

The story of Philomela expands upon a question posed by earlier rape narratives of *Metamorphoses*, which is, what is the nature of women's speech and how is that speech to be read?

In "Arachnologies: The Woman, The Text, and the Critic," Nancy Miller argues that "the language of textiles tends to engender... a metaphysics of femininity."⁴¹ Weaving has perhaps always been understood and represented as a feminine art form, and not simply because women have historically been the weavers of their households and cultures, but also because weaving came to represent Western notions of women themselves. That is, in history weaving is not only

⁴¹ Nancy K. Miller, 'Arachnologies: The Woman, the Text, and the Critic,' *The Poetics of Gender*, (Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 270-90, p. 271.

a feminine occupation but also a symbol and metaphor of femininity. In the Classical world weaving and spinning were both feminine skills as well as feminine virtues, tied to Greco-Roman fantasies about the ideal woman. The virtuous Roman woman was sometimes given the common epitaph “*domum servavit, lanam fecit,*” meaning “She kept the house, she made wool.”⁴² Additionally, in Roman weddings, the bride would often carry a loom and distaff as a ritual symbol of the role she would now occupy in her husband’s household.⁴³ In *De Rerum Natura* Lucretius claims that men were the first to weave, but that they then gave the task to women because the craft was too “*mollis*” (soft) for the masculine sex.⁴⁴ Arguing the opposite conviction, though with a misogyny not altogether different from Lucretius’, Freud attributes the invention of weaving to women. In his letter on “Femininity,” he posits how female psychology led to the origin of the woven tapestry, connecting weaving to his theory of penis envy. He writes:

It seems that women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization; there is, however, one technique which they may have invented – that of plaiting and weaving. If that is so, we should be tempted to guess the unconscious motive for the achievement. Nature herself would seem to have given the model which this achievement imitates by causing the growth at maturity of the pubic hair that conceals the genitals. The step that remained to be taken lay in making the threads adhere to one another, while on the body they stick into the skin and are only matted together. If you reject this idea as fantastic and regard my belief in the influence of lack of a penis on the configuration of femininity as an *idée fixe*, I am of course defenseless.⁴⁵

To Freud, women weave out of an unconscious desire to conceal and to compensate for what they lack – both the literal phallus and, reading beyond Freud, all that the phallus represents, including “the capacity to engender life and in patrilinear society to give that life a legitimate

⁴² Patricia Salzman-Mitchell, *A Web of Fantasies: Gaze, Image, and Gender in Ovid’s Metamorphoses* (Ohio State University Press, 2005), p. 120.

⁴³ U. E. Paoli, *Rome. Its People, Life, and Customs*, Translated by R.D. Macnaghten. (Longman, 1963), p. 117

⁴⁴ Salzman-Mitchell, p. 120

⁴⁵ Sigmund Freud, “Femininity,” *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis*, 22, 1933, 112-135, 132.

name.”⁴⁶ Even if we reject Freud’s arguments about the significance of penis envy in the development of female psychology, we might still agree that weaving emerges for women as a form of art and perhaps even a form of speech that seeks to compensate for that which they do not and cannot possess. In Greek society – where women were denied citizenship and where, with only a few known (and fragmentary) exceptions, exclusively men wrote poetry and performed drama – weaving does come to stand in as a silent substitute for the speech and speech-power women lack.

In Greek literature women do not speak, rather, they weave. While men wage war over Helen, she weaves a tapestry depicting that war.⁴⁷ As a weaver, she makes the Trojan and Achaean soldiers the objects of her artistic gaze, temporarily inverting the hierarchy of gaze that orders her story. While men fought for Penelope’s hand in marriage and the dissolution of her husband’s household, Penelope wove (and un-wove) not so much a tapestry, but a plot. The reader of the *Odyssey* understands that from her female position, Penelope cannot say no to the suitors; her speech power is severely limited. Instead, she uses the feminine art of weaving to enact a stratagem that allows her to recompense for her powerlessness. Likewise, Philomela’s tapestry is a stratagem cleverly invented as a direct response to the loss of her tongue. In cutting Philomela’s tongue, Tereus performs a castration. He severs the lingual phallus and thereby prompts Philomela’s weaving. Weaving would seem to be Woman’s metaphorical speech, the speech by which she produces a substitute for the verbal art she lacks.

However, this perspective is complicated by the connection made in dominant literary speech traditions between weaving and poetry, which establishes another “language of textiles,” to borrow Miller’s phrasing, that appropriates the feminine as masculine. In a passage from *The*

⁴⁶ Bergen, p. 16

⁴⁷ See Homer, *Iliad*, 3.125-28

Pleasure of the Text, Barthes discusses the definition of ‘text’ and its implications, drawing on the word’s particularly rich etymological history:

Text means *Tissue*; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in perpetual interweaving, lost in this tissue – this texture – the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of [her] web. Were we fond of neologisms, we might define the theory of the text as an *hyphology* (*hyphos* is the tissue and the spider’s web).⁴⁸

‘Text’ as we use it in English derives from the Latin *textum* (as does ‘texture’), which can and often is translated as ‘tissue,’ as well as ‘web.’ *Textum* is related to another Latin noun, *texta*, meaning ‘weavings’ or, its descendent in English, ‘textiles.’ Based on this linguistic relationship, Barthes asks us to think of literary texts as metaphorically akin to the process of weaving, inviting us to visualize texts as woven tissues. “*Text* means *tissue*” means *textile* and *web*, means *textured*, *woven*, and the ongoing *weaving*.

This relationship, as Barthes indicates in his reference to ‘*hyphos*,’ long predates Latin; the Greek poets and prophets often described their work as a form of ‘weaving’ or ‘sewing.’ Sappho, Pindar, and Bacchylides each described their craft of poetry as a kind of weaving that produced a patterned web or tapestry of song. As Jane Snyder argues, “Weaving was closely linked in the Greek mind to singing... this link led naturally to the Greek lyric poets’ use of metaphors derived from the art of weaving to describe their own art as a ‘web of song.’”⁴⁹ The Greeks inherited this tradition from ancient Indo-European languages, whose verbs relating to the poetic arts hold connotations of the crafting arts, particularly of weaving and sewing.⁵⁰ The Greek word for ‘hymn,’ one of the nouns mostly commonly used in Ancient Greek literature to

⁴⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, translated by Richard Miller (Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 64.

⁴⁹ Jane Snyder, “The Web of Song: Weaving Imagery in Homer and the Lyric Poets,” *The Classical Journal*, 76 (3), 1981, 193-96, 193.

⁵⁰ See M. Durante “Ricerche sulla preistoria della lingua poetica greca. La terminologia relative alla creazione poetica,” *Atti della Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, 15, 1960, 231-49.

mean ‘song’ – ὕμνος – most likely derives from the verb ‘to weave’ – ὑφαίνειν – often appearing in conjunction with it in Greek poetry.⁵¹ A strong etymological relationship therefore exists between ὕμνος and the noun ὑφή (literally, ‘the thing woven’).⁵² Additionally, another linguistic link between weaving and poetry is found in the Greek verb κρέκειν, ‘to strike,’ which refers to both the action of throwing the shuttle through the warp of a loom and the action of hitting the strings of a lyre with a plektron, an instrument with a shape not unlike that of the Greek shuttle. Mechanically, Greek looms and Greek lyres were similar objects: the loom was a large, upright instrument with two vertical posts and a horizontal crossbar at the top from which the strings of the warp were suspended. More variety existed among lyres, but one type of lyre portrayed on Attic vases is an instrument also consisting of two vertical arms and horizontal crossbar from which the strings ran, suspended at the base by the soundbox.⁵³ Playing the lyre was therefore reminiscent of the action of weaving. A partial line from Sappho’s (much damaged) fragment 99 reads “χορδασι ... κρεκην,” ‘to strike on the strings,’ but also ‘to weave on the strings,’ applying the double meaning of κρέκειν to liken music to weaving, texts to textiles.⁵⁴

From Sappho, we also have the epithets of “weaver of stories” from fragment 188 and “weaver of wiles” from fragment 1, which demonstrate the metaphorical link made not just between weaving and poetry, but also between weaving and a certain kind of intellectual thought process. Synder observes that 27 passages within Homer include references to weaving, the majority of which use the verb ὑφαίνειν in a literal sense, referring to a woman weaving on a loom. However a number of these passages instead use ὑφαίνειν as a metaphor for an intellectual process, such as when Odysseus and Menelaus ‘weave’ words and counsels. Even more

⁵¹ Gregory Nagy, *Homer the Classic* (Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁵² Synder, 194.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

interestingly, Odysseus, the suitors, and Athena are each said to “μῆτιν ὑφαίνειν,” or to ‘weave a *mêtis*,’ *mêtis* being a unique Greek word often translated as ‘stratagem’ or ‘wiles.’⁵⁵ Bergen argues that for the Greeks the art of weaving held a certain “trickiness,” an “uncanny ability to make meaning out of inarticulate matter, to make silent material speak.”⁵⁶ This “trickiness” finds its equivalent in the Greek concept of *mêtis* (μῆτις), which in addition to meaning ‘stratagem’ or ‘wiles,’ can also be translated as ‘transformative intelligence.’ *Mêtis* is the ability to change shape and in particular the ability to defeat your enemy by taking on his own shape. The word refers to both the strategy and the mental ability to devise it.⁵⁷ Odysseus is said to weave a *mêtis* when he devises the plan to escape from the Cyclops by grabbing onto the underside of the sheep.⁵⁸ The suitors weave a *mêtis* when they conspire to kill Telemachus, while in response Athena weaves a *mêtis* for Odysseus, transforming him upon his return into a beggar (the role the suitors occupy in his home) so that he can best them.⁵⁹ However, it is Penelope who of the characters of the *Odyssey* is the one who most literally weaves a stratagem, a *mêtis*. Yet, Homer often describes her as weaving upon her loom but never describes her as weaving a *mêtis*, which tells us that while weaving might be the metaphoric speech of the female – the *mêtis* by which she asserts power in the phallogocentric system that has denied power to her – this same feminine speech power is re-gendered and re-appropriated as male, fit for the divinity and androgyny of Athena but not for human women.

This appropriative engendering is evident in the story of Metis, one of the Greek goddesses and the mother of Athena, who Homer tells us was ‘famous among all the gods for

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Bergen, p. 17.

⁵⁷ For a more complete discussion of *mêtis* and its meaning in Greek, see M. Detienne and J-P Vernant. *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, Translated by J. Lloyd, (University of Chicago, 1991).

⁵⁸ Homer, *Odyssey* 9.422.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 4.678 and 13.397.

mêtis.”⁶⁰ According to Hesiod’s *Theogony*, when Zeus became king of the Gods he immediately married Metis, “whose knowledge was greatest of gods and mortal men.”⁶¹ Metis then became pregnant with Athena, which worried Zeus because it had been prophesized that Metis, herself extremely powerful, would bear powerful children, including a son who would overthrow Zeus. To avoid this threat, Zeus tricked Metis into turning herself into a fly and then swallowed her, appropriating the fetus from her womb into his own stomach. Hesiod tells us that Zeus in effect wove a *mêtis* against Metis: he “deceived her mind with a trick through wily words” so that he could make his wife’s knowledge and power his own.⁶² Zeus then gives birth to Athena from his own mind, and she enters the world as the motherless daughter of Zeus, perpetually virginal and loyal to her father. In this myth, the patriarch appropriates the power originally assigned to the female, both the power of *mêtis* and the related power of reproduction.⁶³ Zeus ensures that he alone will possess the knowledge and power that Metis represents.⁶⁴ Even before marrying and ingesting Metis, Hesiod introduces Zeus in the *Theogony* as “μητίετα,” ‘endowed with *mêtis*.’⁶⁵ Similarly, in the opening of the *Odyssey* Homer presents Odysseus as “πολύμητις,” meaning ‘he of much *mêtis*.’⁶⁶ Furthermore, before Athena, the rightful daughter of Metis, weaves a *mêtis* for

⁶⁰ Ibid., 13.299.

⁶¹ Hesiod, *Theogony* line 887

⁶² Ibid., lines 889-90.

⁶³ Women’s reproductive power is the primary anxiety of the *Theogony*. In each generation, the patriarch moves more closely toward appropriating the power of reproduction, culminating in Zeus’ elimination of Metis and the ‘birth’ of Athena. The one instance in the *Theogony* when a female deity is said to exercise the power of *mêtis* occurs when Rhea weaves a *mêtis* to save the infant Zeus. She substitutes a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes for the child, whom she then presents to her husband Cronus as his son. Of this Bergen writes, “who except his wife can vouch for his true child, the legitimate heir to his property and his proper name? Only the female has the knowledge necessary to tell the true from the false heir, but it is this very knowledge that also makes her able to substitute for the truth a false thing that resembles it. Her knowledge gives her the power of falsification in the domain of sexual reproduction, just as on the level of language the knowledge of the Muses makes it possible for them to utter either *alêtheia* ‘true things’ or *pseudea homoia etumoisin* ‘false things like to real things.’ The (re-)production of social legitimacy and true meaning are in the hands of the female, but so thereby is the power of *mêtis*, the power of substitution and transformation” (p 18). Here Bergen beautifully illustrates how masculine anxiety lies at the center of the gendering and appropriative re-gendering of *mêtis* and also more generally of speech power.

⁶⁴ Bergen, p. 18

⁶⁵ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 56

⁶⁶ Bergen, p. 17

Odysseus in Book 13 he weaves a *mêtis* for himself in Book 9. These texts attempt to present *mêtis* as an attribute that belonged to men before it was ever demonstrated or enacted by female deities. While weaving as a craft is feminine, either too *mollis* (according to Lucretius) or born out of women's own awareness and shame of their inferiority (according to Freud), weaving as a metaphor for language and intellectual thought is always appropriated as masculine and its appropriation concealed.

Therefore, in a traditional and classical conception of weaving, weaving is either literal, feminine, and inferior; or metaphoric, masculine, and powerful. However feminist scholarship has highlighted a third way of viewing weaving within the story of Philomela (as well as in the stories of Penelope and Arachne), which recognizes weaving as a mechanism for women's prohibited speech and thereby women's resistance. In a feminist analysis, male mythological characters and male writers seek to appropriate and disguise women's woven *mêtis* precisely because of anxieties surrounding the power of that speech and its capacity for resistance against patriarchal violence and patriarchal structures.

The myth of Philomela centers on a woman's experience of violation, connecting that physical, sexual violation to a loss of language. Her rape occurs in three interconnected parts: Tereus' declaration to Philomela that he will rape her, the rape-act itself, and the silencing of Philomela through the removal of her tongue. Ovid joins Philomela's physical rape to a sequence of lingual rapes, wherein Tereus uses speech to exert power over Philomela and then successively strips her of the power of language. Elissa Marder observes that this narrative "establishes a relationship between the experience of violation and access to language."⁶⁷ Philomela's experience of sexual violation is connected to and represented by a lingual silencing.

⁶⁷ Elissa Marder, 'Disarticulated Voices: Feminism and Philomela,' *Hypatia*, 7, 1992, 148-66, 157.

Within the myth, language serves as a locus of power. Tereus speaks of raping Philomela, enacts that speech, and ultimately rapes Philomela of her speech. In cutting off her tongue, he underscores the effect of the rape-act, displacing the primary violation in the text from one of sexuality to one of language. Ovid narrates the physical rape:

*Includit fassusque negas et virginem et unam
Vi superat frustra clamato saepe parente,
Saepe sorore sua, magnis super Omnia divis.
Illa tremat velut agna pavens, quae saucia cani
Ore excussa lupi nondum sibi tuta videtur,
Utque columba suo madefactis sanguine plumis
Horret adhuc avidosque timet, quibus haeserat, unguis. (6.524-30)*

Inforc't her; a weake virgin, and but one.
Helpe father! sister helpe! in her distresse
She cries; and on the Gods, with like successe.
She trembles like a lambe, snatcht from the phangs
Of some fell wolfe; that dreads her former pang:
Or as a doue, who on her feathers beares
Her bloods fresh staines, and late-felt talants feares.⁶⁸

In this passage Ovid moves from a narrative description of the story to a symbolic one, choosing to recount the rape not as it happened, but in similes that compare the rape to an encounter between a wild predator and its prey. Philomela is not presented as herself, but as a lamb nearly escaping the mouth of the wolf and as a dove that not only bears her own blood on her feathers but is “*suo madefactis*,” that is, ‘drenched’ with it (6.529). Ovid displaces the visual presentation of her body in favor of the image of an injured animal. In doing so, he gives us a disarticulated narrative, one in which trauma is not (or perhaps cannot) be expressed in human terms. In the following line Ovid continues, “*Mox, ubi mens rediit*” or “Soon, when her senses came back,” highlighting that the experience of the rape occurs outside of Philomela’s consciousness. Due to the lapse in articulation that occurs in the text during this portion of the narrative, the rape also

⁶⁸ Sandys, 6.574-80.

occurs outside of what the narrator and audience can consciously know of the experience of the rape. What we do experience is a failure of language to adequately express trauma.

Language in the story of Philomela – *lingua*, the same word used in the text to mean ‘tongue,’ exercises power, as when Tereus uses language to convince Philomela’s father to allow her into his custody, and when he declares his intention to rape Philomela and that speech act is closely connected with the performance of the act itself. However, Philomela is denied lingual power. She does not speak in the text prior to her declaration of her intention to proclaim Tereus’ wrongdoing, an act immediately prevented by Tereus’ sword. Philomela loses access to language, but as the narrative illustrates, that *lingua* or language is by nature a vulnerable entity susceptible to failure, mutilation, and amputation. In other words, Ovid presents language as imperfect.

In his text Ovid gives more attention to the mutilation of the tongue than to the previous sexual violation. What details of the first crime he spares he now more than compensates for in his presentation of the second. As Anderson comments, “Ovid goes beyond the decorum recommended by our nineteenth century.”⁶⁹ And indeed he does, as he vividly describes how, once removed, the severed tongue writhes on the floor seemingly speaking for Philomela:

*Ille indignantem et nomen patris usque vocantem
Luctantemque loqui comprehensam forcipes linguam
Abstulit ense fero; radix micat ultima linguae,
Ipsa iacet terraeque tremens inmurmurat atrae,
Utque salire solet mutilatae cauda colubrae,
Palpitat et moriens dominae vestigia quaerit. (6.555-60)*

her tongue in pincers caught,
His sword devideth from the panting root:
Which, trembling, murmurs curses at his foot.
And as a serpents taile, disseuer’d Leaps:
Euen so her tongue: and dying sought her steps.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Anderson, p. 224.

⁷⁰ Sandys, 6.612-16.

Sandys loses much of the poetry of Ovid's passage, which presents us first with an image of the open mouth of Philomela and the root of the tongue flickering in vain, before focusing on the severed body of the tongue and its grotesque fit of motion – its twitching, muttering, writhing, and wriggling toward the feet of Philomela.⁷¹ The tongue works as synecdoche for the body of Philomela, allowing Ovid to displace his description of the violence away from the woman and onto tongue. Yet the tongue also acts as a symbol for much more than Philomela's violated body. In its dying stutter it insists on forever calling upon the "*nomen patris*," 'the name of the father.' This is the *lingua* of patriarchal order, desperately invoking (as Philomela does immediately following the rape) the stability of patriarchal law and paternal order. Tereus' transgression has been a transgression of the law of the father; he is the Barbarian who, having been given one daughter by the legal ritual of marriage, now steals the other by savage force. As Marder writes, "If Philomela's tongue, in its last dying gasp, calls for the name of the father, it is perhaps because the invocation of patriarchal law, the stability of place within the patriarchal law, is the only language that this tongue can speak."⁷²

Once the tongue that calls out the *nomen patris* is silenced, Philomela's access to the language of the paternal order is lost. This is the moment of the Freudian castration, the amputation of the lingual phallus that relegates the mutilated woman to the loom and to a language of disarticulation. Silenced by the rape of her tongue, Philomela now weaves a *mêtis* like Penelope, but unlike Penelope her *mêtis* does not work to preserve the patriarchal household and the paternal order of marriage – this is already irrevocably lost, corrupted by Tereus' rape of his sister-in-law and the removal of the *lingua et nomen patris usque vocantem*. Instead,

⁷¹ Anderson, p. 224

⁷² Marder, 160.

Philomela weaves a sign that we recognize as the distinctly feminine voice of the violated woman, a sign that calls upon the name of the sister rather than the name of the father.

Ovid describes Philomela's tapestry only as "*purpureasque notas filis intexuit albis*" 'purple marks on a white background' (6.577). Importantly, *notas* – marks, signs – can mean both writing on a page (as in punctuation, perforation) or a graphic mark on the body, like a brand or tattoo.⁷³ Thus Ovid does not specify whether Philomela weaves her story through words or pictures, but the implication is that the speech of her tapestry is one of disarticulation, delivered outside of defined written and graphic forms, purposefully ambiguous as well as removed from our access as an audience. This element likely comes from Greek written accounts of the story. In Apollodorus' telling, he writes that Philomela "ὄφηνασα ἐν πέπλω γράμματα," 'wove γράμματα into a robe,' where γράμματα like *notas* can refer to either pictures or writing.⁷⁴ The imagery of the tapestry – purple thread against a white background – as a visual symbol suggests Philomela's violated body and the theft of her virginity. In Ovid's text we might also recall the imagery of Arachne's tapestry from the beginning of Book 6, a blasphemously perfect composition that depicted 20 scenes of women raped by gods. For Ovid, Arachne's textile represents his own *textum*, as in its subject matter and its compositional lack of order it echoes the first books of *Metamorphoses* and their presentation of the tales of divine *amor*. However, Arachne, unlike Ovid, is a human woman and so her decision to weave a tapestry in the competition with Athena that speaks to women's experiences of sexual violation also bears a link to Philomela's woven record of the violence perpetrated against her.

While it is unclear how Philomela communicates to her sister through the tapestry the details of what, where, and by whom, what the myth does make clear is that when Procne

⁷³ Marder, 161.

⁷⁴ Bergen, p. 17

receives the tapestry, she understands its meaning instantly and perfectly, receiving and responding to the textile in the same form in which it was crafted: in silence. Marder writes, “When Procne receives the weaving, she too is rendered speechless; she loses her voice, and her tongue can find no expression for her outrage. Although Procne still has a literal tongue, the tongue has no language with which she can speak her rage.”⁷⁵ Philomela loses a tongue that only knows and speaks of patriarchal order, and therefore she speaks in a new voice that is woven, silent, divorced from the only language that she knew. Procne’s experience mirrors this since when she receives and understands Philomela’s tapestry, she also comes to recognize the collapse of the paternal order, of the legal sanctity that bound and protected her own marriage. In turn she too loses that language that she had known and adopts the disarticulation of Philomela’s silent speech.

Here the story shifts as Philomela’s woven *mêtis*, now complete and fulfilled, gets taken up by her sister’s *mêtis* of revenge. Procne’s plot can be read as a rebellion against paternal order. While she initially considers avenging the mutilation of Philomela’s tongue with the symmetrical mutilation of some part of Tereus’ body, answering loss with loss, she instead answers loss with excess:

She stuffs his mouth and belly with the body of his son, leaving Tereus no room for words. Procne violates her husband by making him gag on the law of the father; she arrests the progression of paternity by feeding him his own child through the mouth. Procne thus uses her own child as a substitute for a tongue... In the body of the father, the belly becomes the place of a tomb instead of a womb. Rather than relying on a logic of exchange and a discourse of loss, Procne transgresses the boundaries of the male body by forcing it to assume the presence of another. Metaphorically, Procne turns Tereus into a pathetic mimicry of a sterile, masculine maternity.⁷⁶

As stated earlier, one way of reading Procne’s revenge is as a demonstration of loyalty to her natal, Athenian family and a rejection of her conjugal, Barbarian one, a message that would

⁷⁵ Marder, 161.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 161-2.

have been agreeable to Sophocles' male Athenian audience. However, to the extent to which the myth engages with Athenian anxieties about the threat of Barbarian invasion, it also engages with masculine anxieties about the threat of women's speech, particularly women's collective speech. We have to remember that a primary impetus of the story's tragedy is sororal fidelity – Procne's desire to see her sister. In patriarchal terms Tereus' rape of Philomela ought to destroy the bond between sisters, making them enemies to each other, as Philomela recognizes in horror immediately following the rape. In the story's opening, Procne and Philomela are bound in sisterhood through their common relationship to their father. Following Philomela's rape, they are made rivals by their common relationship to Tereus. However once Philomela discovers the disarticulated language of the loom, they are again made sisters, this time not through a man but rather in resistance to one, allied by their joint divorce and defiance of paternal order. Procne rescues Philomela during the Bacchic festival, taking advantage of the frenzied celebration to steal her sister from captivity and enact her revenge plot, the bacchanal being a time of liberation and escape from the order of the everyday and therefore also a locus for the Greeks of extreme anxiety surrounding women's behavior and sexuality. When Procne and Philomela manage to unite in this setting in order to conspire against Tereus, murdering his firstborn son and Pandion's grandson, they realize the greatest nightmare of the Athenian patriarch.

Lines of Influence

Keats as a Reader of Shakespeare's Philomel in *The Eve of St. Agnes*

Keats would have known the myth of Philomela from a variety of sources, including Ovid's Latin text, Sandys' 17th century translation of *Metamorphoses*, and Lemprière's *Bibliotheca Classica* (1788), which according to his friend Charles Cowden Clarke, Keats had nearly memorized.⁷⁷ However none of these sources carried quite the same import for Keats as Shakespeare. In his essay, "Keats's sources, Keats's allusions," Ricks writes of Keats' relationship with Shakespeare, "Shakespeare has soaked Keats's heart through."⁷⁸ In this phrasing, Ricks describes a deeply intimate and emotional connection between the two poets. In giving Shakespeare agency in this statement, he allows Shakespeare to cross boundaries of time and mortality to act upon Keats. The choice of "soaking through" suggests a full immersion, as though Shakespeare represented for Keats a kind of literary baptism. Based on his letters, we know Keats felt extraordinarily affected by Shakespeare's works. In an April 1817 letter to Reynolds full of (perhaps unconscious) Shakespearian echoes, he confesses that a passage from *King Lear* "has haunted me intensely." This passage is Edgar's question to Gloucester in Act IV scene 1, "Hark, do you hear the sea?" – a passage in which Shakespeare asks both Gloucester and his audience to imagine a sea that exists neither on the stage nor in the play. Nonetheless, its mists and sea-sprays, as Ricks perceives, seem to have saturated Keats' heart. Ricks allows for a reading of Keats in which the whole of his writings and thoughts – if not directly or consciously engaged in a conversation with Shakespeare – still bear echoes and invisible traces of Shakespeare's lines.

⁷⁷ Aileen Ward, *John Keats: The Making of a Poet* (Viking Press, 1963), p. 417.

⁷⁸ Christopher Ricks, 'Keats's sources, Keats's allusions', in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan Wolfson (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 152-169.

Shakespeare's haunting of Keats carries over from his letters into his poetry, upon which Keats considered Shakespeare a principle influence. In the same letter to Reynolds, Keats happily recounts hanging a print of Shakespeare's head above his books. By the time Keats wrote his narrative poem *The Eve of St. Agnes* in the beginning of 1819, he had systematically read and re-read Shakespeare's works and Hazlitt's *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, all of which Keats annotated and marked considerably.⁷⁹ Written in Spenserian stanzas, *The Eve of St. Agnes* reveals a tapestry of classical and literary sources and influences, Shakespeare among them. Given the similarity between Act II scene 2 of *Cymbeline* – Iachimo's clandestine invasion of Imogen's bedchamber – and the central scene of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *Cymbeline* is likely among the major influences of the poem.

One of Shakespeare's lesser-read plays, *Cymbeline* experienced a revival in popularity during Keats' time due to Coleridge and Hazlitt's admiration for its poetic language. The play tells the story of Cymbeline, Roman King of England, and his daughter Imogen. In defiance of her father's wishes, Imogen marries the lowborn but gentlemanly Posthumus, whom her father promptly exiles to Italy. While banished, Posthumus meets the villainous Iachimo, who wagers with Posthumus that he can seduce the supposedly virtuous Imogen. Iachimo pays a visit to Imogen in the English court, but, loyal to Posthumus, Imogen refuses his advances. Not prepared to lose his wager, Iachimo then sneaks into Imogen's bedchamber by hiding in a chest. Once Imogen has fallen asleep, Iachimo emerges from the chest and takes note of the details of Imogen's bedchamber, stealing a bracelet from her arm to support his claim of having seduced her. Returning to Italy, Iachimo falsely convinces Posthumus that Imogen has given up her chastity. Distraught and overcome with jealousy, Posthumus orders a servant to murder Imogen, which fortunately fails to happen. After much confusion and complication, Imogen's virtue is

⁷⁹ R.S. White, *Keats as a reader of Shakespeare* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), p. 16.

restored, Posthumus reunited with his faithful wife and apologetic father-in-law, and Iachimo's wickedness forgiven in Act V – providing an alternate comic ending to the play's *Othello*-esque plot.

Imogen was a memorable character for Keats and an example to him of one kind of ideal Shakespearian womanhood. In his folio edition of *Cymbeline*, Keats marks many of Imogen's lines.⁸⁰ She also appears as a central figure in Keats's description of "poetical character" in his October 27, 1819 letter to Woodhouse. Showcasing Shakespeare's ability to craft a diversity of personalities among his characters, Keats selects Imogen as a virtuous counterpart to the wicked Iago. He writes that the ideal poetical Character "enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated – It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen."⁸¹ Following the parallel construction of these lines, Imogen comes to represent those light and fair things of literature. In this passage we see Keats thinking within binaries – "foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated." Imogen is one pole of a dichotomy, existing in Keats' memory in contrast to her complement in Iago. For Keats she embodies moral purity, standing as one extreme on a poetic continuum of virtue.

Similarly, the whole of *The Eve of St. Agnes* is a poem of binaries – between Porphyro and Madeline, masculine and feminine, hot and cold, waking and sleeping, human and supernatural, reality and artifice. Porphyro is a masculine hero with a "heart on fire," while Madeline is a pale, ethereal being "free from mortal taint."⁸² Within *The Eve of St. Agnes*, the saintly and ethereal quality of Madeline's character bears traces of Imogen's innocence. In *The Eve of St. Agnes*, Madeline exists in a parallel construction with Porphyro, reminding us of Imogen.

⁸⁰ White, p. 79.

⁸¹ Keats, 'Letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818,' *The Major Works*, p. 418.

⁸² Keats, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, lines 75 and 225.

Verbal echoes from Act II scene 2 of *Cymbeline* reverberate through *The Eve of St. Agnes*. Iachimo says to the sleeping Imogen, “How bravely thou becomest thy bed, fresh lily, and whiter than the sheets!”⁸³ Similarly, Keats describes the bodies of St. Agnes’ maids as “beauties, lily-white” lying unclothed and supine in their beds.⁸⁴ Imogen’s eyes are “white and azure laced;” likewise Madeline “slept an azure-lidded sleep” within “blanched linen, smooth, and lavender’d.”⁸⁵ The color scheme Keats gives to his poem – its fresh whites, blues, and purples, accented with the flush of tapers and throbbing stars, recalls the soft whites and blues and brilliant rubies of Iachimo’s speech in Act II. The physical setting of Madeline’s bedchamber is reminiscent of Imogen’s bedchamber, both rooms located within ancient castles and decorated with the sort of objects that adorn the notional Romantic castle – stained-glass casements, rich tapestries, tables and trunks and chained lamps, art objects and musical instruments. Moreover, the physicality of Madeline’s and Imogen’s bedchambers permeates their respective texts. In Act II scene 2 of *Cymbeline*, the physical setting of Imogen’s bedchamber is critical to the narrative of the play. Iachimo carefully notes and records the details of the room so that he can convince Posthumus he has been inside it, thereby throwing suspicion on Imogen’s chastity. In *Cymbeline*, then, Iachimo’s physical intrusion into Imogen’s bedchamber is a substitute for his (imagined and believed) invasion of Imogen’s body. The physical bedchamber serves as an extension and representation of the woman to whom it belongs, its physicality linked to her sexuality. Likewise, in *The Eve of St. Agnes* we are made to understand that Porphyro’s entrance into Madeline’s bedchamber tarnishes Madeline’s virtue, provoking Angela’s initial hesitation to help Porphyro sneak into the chamber. As in *Cymbeline*, a man’s entrance into a chaste woman’s room violates her chastity, allowing his entrance into the room to symbolize a

⁸³ William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, The Pelican Shakespeare (Penguin Books, 1964), II.ii.15-6.

⁸⁴ *The Eve of St. Agnes*, line 51.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, lines 262-3.

sexual entrance. Thus, in *Cymbeline* and *The Eve of St. Agnes*, the physicality of the setting suggests the physicality of Imogen and Madeline, imbuing the bedchambers – with their arras and curtains and pictures and decorative objects – with a distinct sensuousness.

The parallels between Iachimo's entrance into Imogen's bedchamber and Porphyro's entrance into Madeline's bedchamber create a problem for readers of Keats' poem because they suggest that a violation occurs in *The Eve of St. Agnes*. In 1961, Jack Stillinger first called attention to the possibility that Porphyro rapes Madeline. His essay, "The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Skepticism in 'The Eve of St. Agnes,'" responded to Earl Wasserman's 1953 metaphysical reading of the poem. Wasserman had drawn on two passages from Keats's early letters to argue for a philosophical interpretation of the poem. The first passage, from Keats' November 22, 1817 letter to Bailey, likens the imagination to Milton's depiction of Adam's dream – "he awoke and found it truth."⁸⁶ Wasserman notes the similarity between Adam's dream and Madeline's dream, with Madeline, like Adam, waking to find the figure of her dream made real. However, Stillinger took issue with Wasserman's neglect of the literal events of the poem, pointing to Madeline's distress upon awakening to find Porphyro in her room. Unlike Milton's Adam, who awakes to find Eve "or forever to deplore her loss," Madeline awakes to a "painful change," weeping and moaning when she sees the real Porphyro.⁸⁷

Shakespeare makes his audience understand that Iachimo's invasion of Imogen's bedchamber is a treacherous act. If we were not already sympathetic to the faithful Imogen, we certainly become so by the end of Act II. Scene 2 opens with Imogen sitting in bed reading, the trunk containing the hiding Iachimo in one corner of the stage. Before retiring to sleep, Imogen asks her maid to mark her page. Imogen further calls attention to her book, making a point to tell

⁸⁶ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, VIII, 20-1.

⁸⁷ *The Eve of St. Agnes*, line 300.

us that she has been reading for three hours. We learn in Iachimo's speech that Imogen has been reading Ovid's account of the rape of Philomel. "She hath been reading late / The tale of Tereus; here the leaf's turn'd down / Where Philomel gave up," he observes.⁸⁸ Through this allusion to Ovid Shakespeare suggests that a kind of symbolic rape occurs in this scene. Out of exhaustion Imogen gives up her reading at the very moment in the story when Philomel stops resisting Tereus' assault and accepts her fate, showing a parallel between Imogen and Philomel. In abandoning her reading and succumbing to sleep, Imogen also unknowingly succumbs to Iachimo's inevitable deceit, the trunk ominously present throughout the scene. Shakespeare layers Imogen's story with Philomel's, syncing the two on the same timescale. We imagine the rape of Philomel playing out as we see Imogen falling asleep and Iachimo approaching her bed to steal her bracelet. As further evidence of the violation occurring in this scene, Shakespeare also compares Iachimo to Tarquin, the Roman soldier who raped Lucretia: "Our Tarquin thus / Did softly press the rushes, ere he waken'd / The chastity he wounded," says Iachimo of himself as he creeps out of the trunk towards Imogen's bed.⁸⁹ Similarly, Keats describes Porphyro sneaking out of Madeline's closet, "Noiseless as fear in a wide wilderness, / And over the hush'd carpet, silent, stept, / And 'tween the curtains peep'd, where, lo! – how fast she slept."⁹⁰ In engaging with Act II scene 2 of *Cymbeline*, Keats continues Shakespeare's layering of allusions. To think of Porphyro creeping out of Madeline's closet, Keats asks us to think of Iachimo creeping out of Imogen's trunk, an action Shakespeare asks us to connect to Tarquin's rape of Lucretia and Tereus' rape of Philomel. Madeline becomes an Imogen, a Philomel, and a Lucretia, the darker significance of each story rebounded and magnified in its connection with the others.

⁸⁸ *Cymbeline*, II.ii.44-6.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, II.ii.12-4.

⁹⁰ *The Eve of St. Agnes*, lines 250-2

In *The Eve of St. Agnes* Keats characterizes Porphyro as a predator and Madeline as his prey. In stanza 8, Madeline's breathing is "quick and short," and in stanza 23 "she panted," resembling a frightened animal. Keats often compares her to a bird fleeing from danger. In stanza 22 "she comes... like ring-dove fray'd and fled." In stanza 27, Keats likens Madeline in her bed to a bird "trembling in her soft and chilly nest." Most insidiously, in stanza 23 Keats directly alludes to the myth of Philomel, comparing Madeline's silence to a "tongueless nightingale" that "should swell / Her throat in vain, and die, heart-stifled, in her dell." All of these images, particularly the association of Madeline to Philomel, suggest that Madeline is a victim and Porphyro the predator who threatens her. Porphyro devises a plot to intrude into the rituals of St. Agnes' Eve, desiring to invade Madeline's chamber and person without her knowledge or consent. Whether or not a literal rape occurs in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, we can understand the narrative as a figurative rape, much as Shakespeare asks his audience to consider Act II scene 2 as a figurative rape. In one reading of the scene, Iachimo does not actually damage Imogen's chastity, but in another reading that considers the scene in the context of the play, he does damage it – at least until the truth of her virtue is restored in Act V. In likening Madeline to Philomel as Shakespeare likens Imogen to Philomel, Keats invites a darker reading of the poem. Stillinger writes, "Keats's image [of Madeline as a 'tongueless nightingale'] embraces the entire story of the rape of Philomel, and with it he introduces a further note of evil that prevents us from losing ourselves in the special morality of fairy romance."⁹¹ Stillinger sees Madeline as a "hoodwink'd" dreamer not unlike Ovid's Philomel, and he also sees Keats as engaging with the violent aspects of the Philomel myth. Reading *Cymbeline* as an influence of *The Eve of St. Agnes*

⁹¹ Jack Stillinger, 'The Hoodwinking of Madeline,' in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Eve of St. Agnes*, ed. Allan Danzig (Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 57.

supports Stillinger's interpretation of the poem, challenging us to darken our reading of its romance.

....

Shakespeare himself would have been familiar with the myth of Philomel from Ovid's Latin text and from Arthur Golding's 1567 translation of *Metamorphoses*. Aside from in *Cymbeline*, Philomel also makes an appearance in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but her influence on Shakespeare is most heavily present in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare's most violent and gruesome tragedy (containing 14 murders, 9 of which are staged, as well as rape, cannibalism, and a live burial).⁹² The play commences with the return of Titus, the Roman general, from a bloody war with the Goths. Titus has captured the Queen of the Goths, Tamora, as well as her three sons. In retribution for the death of many of his own sons during the combat, Titus slays Tamora's eldest, unleashing Tamora's undying hatred for Titus. She has her remaining sons, Chiron and Demetrius, rape Titus's daughter Lavinia. In an echo of Ovid's tale, Chiron and Demetrius cut off Lavinia's tongue and then surpass Tereus' violence by also amputating Lavinia's hands so that she cannot communicate who has violated her through speaking, writing, or also presumably weaving. Lavinia is only able to tell what has happened to her when a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* appears on stage in Act IV and she is able to find and present the story of Tereus and Philomela to her father and uncle. In an action that also echoes the story of Io, she manages to trace "Stuprum" (rape) as well as "Chiron" and "Demetrius" in the sand by holding a stick in her mouth and guiding it with her stubbed arms. Adapting the revenge plot of Ovid's Philomela, it is now the father who vows to take revenge in the absence of a sister (and also in the absence of a sister's revenge plot, the father who will murder the violated daughter in the last scene as an honor killing). Titus manages to capture Demetrius and

⁹² Philomel appears in the faeries' song to Titania in Act II scene 2 of *Midsummer*.

Chiron, kills them, and bakes them into a pie that he feeds to Tamora in the final scene of the play. In Ovid's text, when Tereus inquires about Itys' whereabouts at the banquet Procne responds "*Intus habes, quem poscis*," "he is already with you inside" (6.655). Shakespeare borrows this darkly comic punch-line when the emperor asks for Demetrius and Chiron to be brought out and Titus responds, we imagine with much dramatic force, "Why, there they are both, baked in that pie."⁹³

Titus Andronicus is one of Shakespeare's earliest tragedies, if not the earliest, and demonstrates an attempt to emulate and perhaps also parody the genre of bloody revenge tragedy popular in Elizabethan drama. Beyond Shakespeare's period the play has not been well received, including by Keats. In his copy of Shakespeare's works Keats went so far as to vigorously strike out some of the play's most violent passages. One of these censured passages is from the opening of Act II scene 4, in which Demetrius and Chiron jeer at the mutilated Lavinia:

Enter Demetrius and Chiron, with Lavinia, ravished;
her Hands cut off, and her Tongue cut out.

Dem. So, now go tell an if thy tongue can speak,
Who 'twas that cut they tongue, and ravish'd thee.

Chi. Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so;
And, if thy stumps will let thee, play the scribe.

Dem. See, how with signs and tokens she can scowl

Chi. Go home, call for sweet water, wash thy hands.

Dem. She hath no tongue to call, nor hands to wash;
And so let's leave her to her silent walks.

Chi. An 'twere my case, I should go hang myself.

Dem. If thou hadst hands to help thee knit the cord.⁹⁴

Beverly Fields has viewed Keats's striking through of this passage as a "violent response to the idea of violence."⁹⁵ He slashes through the crude reference to the woman's violation and mutilation, and in doing so carries out his own mutilation of her with his pen. She writes, "It

⁹³ Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, The Arden Shakespeare (Harvard University Press, 1953), V.iii.60.

⁹⁴ Caroline Spurgeon, *Keats's Shakespeare* (Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 37 and plate 14.

⁹⁵ Fields p. 246.

suggests that he could not tolerate a representation of the primitive emotions that animate both the myth and the play. At the same time, this interaction with the text permits his involuntary participation in the event: destroying the text he may be said further to violate the violated figure.”⁹⁶ Keats seems to have strong sensibilities against Shakespeare’s graphic presentation of the Philomel myth, sensibilities that provoke an almost violent reaction against violence. Fields goes on to argue that in *The Eve of St. Agnes* Keats aligns Madeline with the “tongueless nightingale” figure of Philomel and Porphyro with Tereus in an attempt to “provide a death for the nightingale in the same spirit in which he must have struck out the passages in *Titus Andronicus*: he destroyed the mythic bird because it stirred the frightened recognition of his unconscious impulses.”⁹⁷ According to Fields, Keats sends Madeline and Porphyro “away into the storm” in the poem’s close as way to dislocate and disperse the dark and violent undertone of their romance.⁹⁸

For her, the central theme of the Philomel story that Keats draws upon in *The Eve of St. Agnes* is fragmentation – the physical dismembering of Philomel and Itys, but also the psychic fragmentation into four characters of what Fields sees as one single figure in conflict: “In the Philomel myth the single figure is bodied forth as victim and victimizer, masculine and feminine; a miracle is provided to avoid resolving the conflicts that are expressed.”⁹⁹ If we accept her reading of the myth, then we might easily find in *The Eve of St. Agnes* a similar dynamic where a single figure in conflict fragments into the disparate binaries of Porphyro and Madeline, victimizer and victim, masculine and feminine. These fragmented figures then disappear in a

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 246.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 250.

⁹⁸ *The Eve of St. Agnes*, line 371.

⁹⁹ Fields, p. 247.

darker, more mystical metamorphosis in the poem's ending that avoids a resolution of conflict or tension.

However, what Fields views as fragmentation might be more aptly recognized as the collapse or dissolution of boundaries, particularly the boundary between the purity and sanctity of the St. Agnes' Eve ritual and the painful (and possibly violent) transgression of its realization. Throughout the poem we see the transmutation – the blurring and shifting and ultimately also the dissolution – of the poem's polarities. In the beginning of the plot's unfurling it appears that Madeline is the innocent victim, the “tongueless nightingale,” while Porphyro is the Tereus figure attempting to steal her. However Porphyro and Madeline do not fall quite so easily into this predator-prey dichotomy. In stanza 19, Keats alludes to Merlin's defeat by Vivien, who craftily used Merlin's own spell against him (what in Greek would be called a *mêtis*). Following this theme of device and deception, Porphyro attempts to trick Madeline through his interposition in St. Agnes' spell, weaving another *mêtis* by which he hopes to take Madeline for himself. However, as St. Agnes' “charmed maid” Madeline weaves a *mêtis* of her own, enacting a spell under which both Porphyro and Madeline will fall (192). Porphyro describes Madeline as belonging to the “secret sisterhood” of the “holy loom,” referring to St. Agnes' associations with wool and weaving, but also alluding to the sisterhood of the loom that unites Philomel and Procne and enables the sisters to take revenge on the man who has violated and deceived them (115-6).¹⁰⁰ The mystical, feminine power of St. Agnes' Eve ultimately impedes Porphyro,

¹⁰⁰ It is worth noting that a similar collapse occurs here in *The Eve of St. Agnes* as that which occurs in *Cymbeline* when Shakespeare layers the narrative of Imogen on top of those of Philomel and Lucretia. Philomel and St. Agnes carry related narratives and associations. Agnes (from the Latin *agnus*, ‘lamb,’ but also the Greek ἀγνή, ‘chaste, sacred’) was martyred at a young age when she refused to give up her virginity because of her faith and was dragged naked into the street, almost raped (she was saved by a divine miracle), and then killed. Her symbol is the lamb, which has also made her a saint of wool and weaving.

hindering him from sexually taking Madeline much like metamorphosis thwarts Apollo's corporeal rape of Daphne and also Tereus' capture and murder of Procne and Philomel.

In the process of attempting to hoodwink Madeline, Porphyro too is hoodwinked. In stanza 23 when Madeline enters her bedchamber a lit candle goes out: "Out went the taper as she hurried in: / Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died" (199-200). Earlier in the poem Keats has associated fire with Porphyro, introducing his character as "young Porphyro, with heart on fire" (75). Porphyro's physical warmth and vitality contrasts with the chill of both the night and Madeline's bedchamber. Thus in these lines the candle serves as a symbol of Porphyro and his corporeality, passion, and masculinity. When Madeline's entrance extinguishes the candle's flame, Madeline figuratively extinguishes Porphyro. The smoke of the candle dies in the moonlight, the moon representing the mystical and feminine power of St. Agnes' Eve. In stanza 32, Porphyro succumbs to the "midnight charm" that holds Madeline in a deep sleep (282). Not only does Porphyro find himself unable to wake Madeline from this charm, but he too falls under it, "entail'd in woofed phantasies" (288). Keats again employs hot-and-cold imagery, writing that this midnight charm is "impossible to melt as iced stream" (283). When Porphyro manages to temporarily wake both himself and Madeline from the spell in stanzas 33-35, Madeline exclaims that Porphyro has changed, now appearing "pallid, chill and drear!" (311). Porphyro has absorbed the feminine chill of Madeline's bedchamber and of St. Agnes's Eve. Moreover, he has lost his youthful and masculine vitality, in a reversal of the Pygmalion story becoming "pale as smooth-sculptured stone" (297). While he entered the poem definitively corporeal, he has since lost some of his human quality.

In stanzas 23-36 both Madeline and Porphyro are neither awake nor asleep, neither lucid nor unconscious. First Madeline succumbs to "the popped warmth of sleep," then Porphyro

follows suit in stanza 32 (237). Then Porphyro, “awakening up,” pulls Madeline out of the depths of her slumber (289). Yet neither completely exits the midnight charm of St. Agnes; Madeline, while purportedly “wide awake,” still appears “dreamingly” (299; 306). Tension exists between the two as Porphyro attempts to wake Madeline and drag her back into his own physical realm, while Madeline seeks to dismiss the physical Porphyro in front of her and bring back the Porphyro of her dream. “Give me that voice again, my Porphyro, / Those looks immortal,” she cries (312-313). This conflict reaches a climax when, in line 320, “into her dream he melted –” Porphyro dissolves into Madeline’s dream. Porphyro, whose goal had been to wake Madeline and bring her into his reality, now falls out of his own reality and into the feminine and supernatural realm of Madeline’s dream. Yet in doing so, he also invades and infiltrates that realm. As in Ovid, in one sense, Porphyro’s rape of Madeline has been thwarted; in another sense, it has been fulfilled. In a sexual and mystical image, Madeline and Porphyro “blendeth” in this passage, Porphyro becoming “like a throbbing star / Seen mid the sapphire heaven’s deep repose” (318-319). This is a re-working of and an engagement with Ovidian metamorphosis. Here Keats gives us the moment of transmutation and apotheosis when romance moves across *corpora*, across boundaries between the real and the supernatural, the waking and the dreaming.

Ultimately, both Madeline and Porphyro are lost to the midnight charm of St. Agnes’ Eve and its metamorphic device. In a moment of pathetic fallacy, as Porphyro and Madeline succumb to the dream, “Love’s alarum” rings and the storm intensifies (323). The chill and frost of St. Agnes’ Eve now gains strength, threatening to shatter the windows of the poem’s setting and invade the text as a whole. At the resolution of this climatic moment, “St. Agnes’s moon” sets, indicating that the spell of St. Agnes is fulfilled (324). Porphyro, who entered the poem a flesh-and-blood young man, will glide out of it a “phantom” alongside his ghost-like lover (361). As

Madeline and Porphyro make their hurried escape from the castle, they pass by a tapestry “rich with horseman, hawk, and hound, / Flutter[ing] in the besieging wind’s uproar” (359). The figures of this tapestry seem to rise off the wall and flee out of the scene and into the distance with Madeline and Porphyro. Indeed, when Keats writes, “They glide, like phantoms into the wide hall,” it is unclear whether he refers to Madeline and Porphyro exclusively, or to the whole ensemble of hunters and lovers (361). This ending mirrors that of the myth of Philomel, when at some sudden and undefined moment the figures of a pursuit (a chase, a hunt) grow wings and fly away into new bodies and into a new realm. Keats’ characters, like Tereus, Procne, and Philomela, recede over the moors and into myth. Like Daphne they become encased in *liber*, transformed into the figures of a textile and a *textum*.

....

Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* has argued that women are like words because they act as signs exchanged by men so that men can communicate with one another. Men exchange women and in doing so bind themselves together. However when the exchange is not equal, conflict emerges between men. Thus in a patriarchal society the role of marriage, what Lévi-Strauss calls “the archetype of exchange,” is to prevent the violence between men that erupts when signs are not exchanged evenly.¹⁰¹ This theory can be illustrated through Herodotus’ account of the Persian wars in the opening of his *Histories* (440 BCE). According to the Persians, it was the Phoenicians who started the conflict when they abducted the Greek king’s daughter Io. In Greek, ‘rape’ and ‘theft’ are expressed by the same word, ἀρπαγή, illustrating Lévi-Strauss’s theory of women as signs of exchange.¹⁰² To rape a woman is the same as stealing her, thus the Phoenicians rape/steal Io from the Greeks. In return

¹⁰¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham; ed. Rodney Needham (Beacon Press, 1969), p. 483.

¹⁰² Bergen, p. 20.

the Greeks steal/rape Europa from Tyre. In doing so, they transform rape into a kind of mutual exchange, forcing the Phoenicians to pay the price they owe for the abduction of Io. What was before a violent exchange becomes a legitimate exchange – a marriage, a union. But the primary union of this marriage is not that between husband and wife, but rather that between Greek and Barbarian, the nation and the foreign woman. The name of the abducted Europa becomes the name of her new land as she now also becomes the origin of the continuation of the Greek race.

In the myth of Philomela, erotic conflicts are really a manifestation of political conflicts. As mentioned before, the true victim of Sophocles's tragedy is Pandion because he loses both of his daughters to the Barbarian king. At the beginning of the tale, Pandion has two unexchanged virgin daughters. He then gives his eldest daughter to the Thracian king in exchange for a political alliance with Thrace. Meanwhile Philomela remains unmarried and unexchanged, and therefore Pandion retains the right and power to offer her in exchange for an alliance with another polis. Joplin argues that Tereus' rape of Philomela creates "a crisis in language" because "the Barbarian refuses to use the women/signs as they are offered him by the Greek."¹⁰³ Tereus does not exchange, he rapes (ἄρπαγή), which is to say, he steals.

René Girard, following after Lévi-Strauss, has argued that marriage represents a form of ritualized violence that serves a sacrificial purpose. When groups of men exchange women, they ritualize the rape/theft. By doing so, they delineate clear boundaries around violence, containing it and thereby keeping peace. As Joplin interprets, "the aura of the sacred and the mysterious that envelops married sexual relations is a sign of the human need for clear boundaries to contain violence."¹⁰⁴ Mary Douglas, another anthropologist, theorized the dialectical interaction of the physical body and the social body, illustrating how ideas about one reflect conceptions of the

¹⁰³ Patricia K. Joplin 'The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours,' (1984), *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World: Readings and Sources*, ed. Laura McClure (Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 265.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 266-7.

other. Working from the ideas of both Girard and Douglas, Joplin argues that “the exchange of women articulates the culture’s boundaries, the woman’s hymen serving as the physical or sexual sign for the limen or wall defining the city’s limits.”¹⁰⁵ The woman’s body represents the political body, the city-state itself. Thus the woman’s chastity, like the walls of the city, is protected by political and ritual sanction and guarded by the patriarch. Both borders are sacred and cannot be invaded except through a ritual that ensures the safety and maintenance of the existing political order. “The first rupture of the hymen is always a transgression, but culture articulates the difference between the opened gate and the besieged fortress. Thus Western culture inherits two ways of using women as signs: as the “opened gate,” which is sanctified, ritualized violence (marriage), and the “besieged fortress,” which is unsanctified, violent theft (rape).

However, in Greek literature and especially in the myth of Philomela, we see strong evidence for the likeness between the sanctified violence of marriage and the unsanctified violence of rape. The Phoenicians’ abduction of Io is undoubtedly a violent theft, until the act is repeated by the Greeks and what was before unsanctified then becomes sanctified. The same violence is made acceptable by its parallel doubling. Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis* (408-406 BCE) provides another excellent example of the Greek conflation of marriage and violence. In this play, the king’s daughter Iphigenia is led to the altar of Artemis as a sacrifice to save her father, Agamemnon, as well as all of Greece during the Trojan War. Importantly, she is led to the sacrifice under the guise of her supposed wedding to Achilles. On the way to the staged wedding, Iphigenia discovers she is not there to be wed, but rather to be stoned by an angry mob who will kill her father if she does not take his place. In an angry speech toward the play’s end, Clytemnestra, Iphigenia’s mother and Agamemnon’s wife, reminds her husband and the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 267.

audience that she married Agamemnon against her will, presenting a parallel image of the woman violently dragged to the ritual altar. Euripides comes very close in this play to the presentation of a feminist argument that marriage is ritualized violence. Meanwhile, in the myth of Philomela we see a further blurring of this boundary between marriage and rape because the same man, Tereus, performs both the marital act and the rape act, taking both daughters away from the same man. Joplin argues that the Philomela myth demonstrates how “the difference between the generative rite (marriage) and the dangerous transgression (rape) is collapsing within the Greek imagination.”¹⁰⁶

The Eve of St. Agnes hints toward the same kind of boundary collapse. In Keats’ poem the ritual of St. Agnes becomes reified by Porphyro’s intrusion into it. On St. Agnes’ Eve, the virgin maiden is supposed to see the man who will become her husband. This is realized when Madeline wakes up and discovers Porphyro there to actually abduct her and make her his bride. Keats portrays Porphyro as violent, making him into a Iachimo, a Tarquin, a Tereus to match Madeline’s depiction as the “tongueless nightingale.” However as we saw, both Porphyro and Madeline fall victim to a power larger than themselves. This is the power of the ritual itself, which is a ritual of piety and romance that suggests the later ritual of marriage, and which in the poem also morphs into a realization of that marriage rite. In *The Eve of St. Agnes* Keats gives us a poetic glimpse into the heart of the “aura of the sacred and the mysterious that envelops married sexual relations” and which Joplin argues draws a boundary around violence.¹⁰⁷ One of the boundaries that the poem collapses is this boundary that contains violence and that relegates it into the space of the ritualized, the sacred, and the romantic. Here, as in *Iphigenia in Aulis* and as in Philomel’s story, that boundary begins to collapse. It seemingly dissolves, like so much

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 269.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 266.

else, as we enter the poetic ambiguity of the dreamlike storm into which Madeline and Porphyro sprint.

The myth of Philomel begins when the Thracian king through marriage takes one daughter away from Athens and into the Barbarian land. Then, he takes a second daughter away from Athens, this time by deception, and takes her not to the Thracian court but rather into the woods. There, in the darkness of that ancient woods, that “*silvis obscura vetustis*,” the place of romantic chase and mythic metamorphosis, he rapes the second daughter and thereby destroys the previous familial and political order.¹⁰⁸ The word ‘forest’ in English comes, by way of French, from the Latin *foris*, meaning ‘outside.’ In Ancient Greece as well as in Medieval Europe, the forest was a location that was outside of society and also, importantly, outside of legal jurisdiction.¹⁰⁹ Consequently, the woods represents a place of escape from the everyday order, a place in which the hierarchy and stability of society vanishes. This is the same as Ovid’s woods, which are a site where *formae* shift into *nova corpora* and where, as in the myth of Philomel, familial and political order is violently, horrendously transgressed. After Tereus has raped Philomela she cries “O what a wild confusion hast thou bred!”¹¹⁰ When Porphyro takes Madeline to a new home “o’er the southern moors” he takes her to this same locus of disordering (351). Like so much else in Keats, this is also a Shakespearean echo, a return to the green world of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In the woods somewhere outside of Athens, where *Midsummer’s* lovers and faeries go romping and like Philomel encounter disorder, deception, and trickery, the boundary between romance and violence becomes less articulated, more fragile. Keats might have struck out the most gruesome and vulgar of *Titus Andronicus’s* passages, but in

¹⁰⁸ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 6.521.

¹⁰⁹ William Marvin, *Hunting Law in Medieval English Literature*, (Brewer, Boydell & Brewer, 2006), 54-57.

¹¹⁰ Sandys, 589.

The Eve of St. Agnes he seems acutely aware of the Shakespearean – and the Greek – exploration of the darker tones that color Western notions of love and marriage.

Ode to a [Tongueless] Nightingale

Reading Philomel in Keats' Two Most Famous Odes

English poetry abounds with nightingales; by the time that Keats wrote there was a convention surrounding them. Though Keats' bird is one of the more famous, his is not especially unique. Half a century before Keats wrote "Ode to a Nightingale" the British poet and physician Mark Akenside wrote "To the Evening Star," which features much of the same iconography as Keats' ode. Both poems describe the darkness of a wooded thicket at nighttime; both contain the moon and stars; both have a speaker who is a rapt auditor to the song of the nightingale and who in hearing the bird's song reflects on human pain and mortality. In Akenside's poem the nightingale flies away like in Keats, though Akenside's speaker follows the bird while Keats' speaker resigns himself to his solitary melancholy. One primary difference between the two poems is that Akenside explicitly refers to the nightingale as Philomela while Keats does not.

The etiology of the nightingale of course traces back to the Classical myth of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela. In Greek accounts of the myth it is Procne who transforms into the nightingale (as in Aristophanes' *Birds*, in which the nightingale is presented as the wife of Tereus in hoopoe form). Her mournful song speaks to her grief at the loss of her son while her plumage bears traces of the bloody filicide. Ovid ambiguously suggests the reverse – that Philomela instead becomes the nightingale while Procne, the swallow. Golding and Sandys flip the Greek pairing with more conviction, Sandys writing: "One sings / In woods; the other neare the house remains: / And on her brest yet beares her murders staines."¹¹¹ The implication in this translation is that Philomela, the sister who had been held captive in the woods for over a year, now flees back to the woods she had known. Meanwhile Procne, the sister who carried out Itys'

¹¹¹ Sandys, 6.730-2.

murder and is now forever marked by her crime, remains in the domestic sphere to which she had belonged. (This accords with the habitats of the birds, as nightingales nest in woodlands while swallows will commonly nest in barns and houses.) Lemprière records with certainty that “[Tereus] was changed into a hoopoe, Philomela into a nightingale, Procne into a swallow, and Itylus into a sandpiper.”¹¹²

Aside from this etiology, however, the nightingale also appears in Classical literature as a symbol for poetry and poetic song. Callimachus substitutes ‘poems’ as ‘nightingales’ in his “Elegy to Heraclitus” (2nd century BCE), most famously translated into English in the late 19th century by William Johnson Cory:

They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead,
They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to shed.
I wept as as I remember’d how often you and I
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.

And that thou art lying, my dear old Carian guest,
A handful of grey ashes, long, long ago at rest,
Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake;
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.¹¹³

The resemblance here to the themes of Keats’ writing is striking; Callimachus speaks of human mortality and the immortality of poetry, symbolized by the nightingale. He anticipates Keats’ “Immortal Bird” by over 2000 years. Keats’ presentation of the nightingale’s “plaintive anthem” is also Classically anticipated by Virgil’s fourth Georgic, in which he compares Orpheus’ poetic grief to the mourning song of the nightingale.¹¹⁴

¹¹² John Lemprière, *Classical Dictionary of Proper Names Mentioned in Ancient Authors (Bibliotheca Classica)* ed. F.A. Wright (Dutton & Company, 1949) Originally published in 1788, p. 479.

¹¹³ William Johnson Cory, ‘Elegy to Heraclitus,’ *The Oxford Book of English Verse 1250-1900*, ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch, (Oxford University Press, 1919)

¹¹⁴ Frank Doggett, “Romanticism’s Singing Bird,” *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 14 (4), 1974, 547-561, 548.

The connection between nightingales and poetry continues through Medieval and Renaissance English verse.¹¹⁵ Sidney's 16th century poem, "The Nightingale," likens the singing bird to a poet. His nightingale is an especially mournful and aestheticized figure who presses her breast against a symbolic thorn, representing the figure of the male poet who sings of his amorous frustrations. Yet Sidney's "The Nightingale," also known by the title of "Philomela," does more by directly addressing the etiology of the nightingale as Philomela: "Her throat in tunes expresseth / What grief her breast oppreseth / For Tereus' force on her chaste will prevailing."¹¹⁶ Sidney locates the mournful song of the nightingale in Philomela's experience of sexual violation and mutilation; however, he also minimizes the tragedy of this experience in declaring that Philomela's suffering is nothing next to the suffering of the lovesick male poet: "But I, who daily craving / Cannot have to content me, / Have more cause to lament me, / Since wanting is more woe than too much having."¹¹⁷ He also suggests that in her new bird form, Philomela has escaped and transcended the cause of her pain, liberated to enjoy an eternal season of springtime the speaker cannot access: "Thine earth now springs, mine fadeth; / Thy thorn without; my thorn my heart invadeth."¹¹⁸ In Sidney we possibly find a source for tension of separation between Keats' speaker and his nightingale. When Keats writes of the nightingale as "being too happy in thine happiness" and of his speaker's inability to access that "melodious plot of beechen green" to which it belongs, he borrows from Sidney's depiction of the nightingale.

In his essay on "Romanticism's Singing Bird," Frank Doggett argues that in the early nineteenth century a shift occurred in the symbolism and depiction of the nightingale in English verse. Where before the nightingale represented the poet figure, in Romantic verse it now took

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Sir Phillip Sidney, "The Nightingale," lines 6-8.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., lines 17-20.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., lines 23-4.

on the quality of a muse, an icon that “personified creativity and artistry as well as the idea of poetry itself.”¹¹⁹ Romantic poets viewed the nightingale as a natural artist. She could embody Romantic notions of spontaneous creativity and the value of finding inspiration in the natural world. Coleridge’s nightingale, from his “The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem” (1798), exhibits these qualities. Coleridge divorces the nightingale from its etiology as Philomela, re-gendering the bird as male and declaring that his “fast thick warble” and “delicious notes” bear no traces of the tragedy of Philomela’s “pity-pleading strains.”¹²⁰

The Romantics continued to see nightingales as synonymous with poets and the nightingale’s song as synonymous with poetry, but like Callimachus’ nightingales, they represented an ideal poetry, the best that verse can do and be. In Shelley’s “A Defense of Poetry” (written in 1821, two years after “Ode to a Nightingale”), he writes that “A poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why.”¹²¹ There is an echo here, as in Keats, to Book 3 of *Paradise Lost*, in which Milton compares himself as a blind poet to a nightingale who “sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid.”¹²² In his January 2, 1819 letter to George and Georgiana (written in the same month Keats began composing *The Eve of St. Agnes*), Keats shares a newly composed poem titled “Bards of Passion and of Mirth,” which describes the great late poets enjoying their second immortality in heaven. They listen to the nightingale singing:

Where the nightingale doth sing
Not a senseless, tranced thing,
But divine melodious truth;

¹¹⁹ Doggett, 550.

¹²⁰ Coleridge, “The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem,” lines 33 and 27.

¹²¹ Shelley, “A Defense of Poetry,” *Norton Anthology of English Literature Volume D: The Romantic Period* (W.W. Norton).

¹²² Milton, *Paradise Lost*, III.37-40.

Philosophic numbers smooth;
Tales and golden histories
Of Heaven and its Mysteries.¹²³

Here the nightingale is an idealized poet who sits where Keats so desperately hoped to someday be, “among the English poets.”¹²⁴ A few months later, in April 1819 (around the time Keats composed “Ode to a Nightingale”), Keats met Coleridge on the street at Highgate and had a conversation with him. Keats recounts the episode to George and Georgiana: “I walked with him at his alderman after-dinner pace for near two miles I suppose. In those two Miles he broached a thousand things. Let me see if I can give you a list: Nightingales, Poetry, on Poetical sensation, Metaphysics...”¹²⁵ His list indicates that the topic of nightingales led to the topic of poetry, the comma suggesting the association between the two.

Keats’ nightingale reflects the nightingale convention of previous verse and of the late 18th and early 19th century. She is a muse, an ideal poet, and also a symbolic embodiment of poetry. What Keats does not clarify in his ode is whether, like so many of the nightingales that came before, she is also an iteration or recollection of Philomela. Doggett argues that whatever association the nightingale has to Philomela becomes but a trace in Keats and in the other Romantics, her connection to the bird re-emerging later, in the Victorian Era. He writes, “The song of the nightingale would have recalled the myth of Philomela to a pre-Romantic poet. The early poems of Keats mention Philomela, but the name is all that remains of the myth and its thesis that the voice of the nightingale is the voice of suffering.”¹²⁶ Perhaps this is so. Yet perhaps also Keats’ earlier mention of Philomela is relevant and present in “Ode to a Nightingale.” The gap between “the early poems” and “the late poems” of Keats is very small;

¹²³ Keats, *The Major Works*, Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 2 January 1819.

¹²⁴ Keats, *The Major Works*, Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 25 October 1818.

¹²⁵ Selected Letters of John Keats Revised Edition, p. 278.

¹²⁶ Doggett, 557.

only four or five months separate the composition of *The Eve of St. Agnes* and “Ode to a Nightingale.” We could imagine that had Keats not contracted tuberculosis when he did, we might today class “Ode to a Nightingale” with the early poems.

In considering how Keats’ nightingale might bear traces of his earlier “tongueless nightingale,” we turn first to a broader exploration of gender in Keats’ life and writing, revealing two main modes of Keats’ engagement with women and the female in his work. The first is a Lacanian ‘othering,’ a relegation of the feminine to outside and beyond the poetic speaker that works to secure his own masculinity. The second mode is an appropriation and an erasure of the feminine or the female into the universal (and therefore the male). For Keats’ relationship to Philomel these modes of engagement work in parallel but polar ways. The tendency to ‘other’ the feminine leads to an othering and also ultimately an idealization of Philomel. Keats’ speaker views the nightingale as alien to his experience and his world, elevating her to an ideal. Meanwhile, the tendency to appropriate and thereby erase the feminine leads to a universalization of Philomel and her experience, morphing the pain and tragedy of her tale (what Doggett calls “the voice of suffering”) into a Keatsian notion of the universal pain that defines human experience.

The Female as ‘Other’ and Keats’ Crisis of Masculinity

In “Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats,” Margaret Homans explores the complicated relationship Keats had with both his female readers and women readers in general, and how this relationship has in turn affected the relationship Keats’ female readers have with him. Homans argues that Keats’ socioeconomic class made him an outsider to academic and literary circles of his day, and that this marginalization or “othering” connected him, in theory, to female readers. She writes, “if gender is a social construct, and if to be socially powerless is to be

a ‘woman,’ then Keats can be classed among women.”¹²⁷ The “Cockney poet,” as his critics referred to him, was born in Moorgate to a family of moderate means. Orphaned at the age of 14, financial strain would haunt Keats for the duration of his life. Unable to afford an education at the more prestigious Eton or Harrow, Keats attended John Clarke’s boarding school in Enfield. His more snobbish critics would later decry his lack of an elite Classical education, a point of much insecurity for Keats. His financial status prevented Keats from entering into a formal engagement with Fanny Brawne, an intolerable frustration to the lovesick poet. In his last days Keats was indebted to and financially dependent on his friends, who had collectively raised the funds to send their gravely ill companion to Italy. As Homans astutely notes, from a class perspective Keats was an outsider, dwelling on the periphery of literate and cultured society – much like the female writers and readers of his era.

Both his contemporaries and his later readers and critics often consider Keats a feminine poet. In his 1822 essay “On Effeminacy of Character” Hazlitt deemed Keats’ poetry effeminate. “I cannot help thinking that the fault of Mr. Keats’ poems,” writes Hazlitt, “was a deficiency in masculine energy of style. He had beauty, tenderness, delicacy, in an uncommon degree, but there was a want of strength and substance.”¹²⁸ For his emotional intensity and his preoccupation with romance, sonnets, and odes – the most feminine of the English literary forms – Keats exists in the poetic canon as an effeminate character. Of the Romantics, Keats is the womanliest personality – melancholy, sickly, emotional. At only 5’2” in height, with curly hair, a thin bone

¹²⁷ Margaret Homans, ‘Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 29 (1990), 341-370, 342.

¹²⁸ Anne Mellor, ‘Keats and the complexities of gender,’ *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan Wolfson (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 214-229, p. 214.

structure and a delicate, often ailing disposition, he failed to fit both an early nineteenth century and a contemporary normative notion of masculinity.¹²⁹

Furthermore, the importance Keats gave to his intimate relationships with siblings and friends demonstrates a feminine tendency towards relational development of the self (as opposed to the traditionally masculine autonomous development of the self). Keats saw reading and writing as social, even conversational activities. After Tom's passing, he wrote to his brother George, "There you are with Birkbeck – here I am with brown – sometimes I fancy an immense separation, and sometimes, as at present, a direct communication of spirit with you.... I shall read a passage of Shakespeare every Sunday at ten o'Clock – you read one at the same time and we shall be as near each other as blind bodies can be in the same room."¹³⁰ Throughout his letters Keats is forever asking his friends for their thoughts on particular passages of the texts he is reading, or asking them to note words or lines of interest to share with him. He also includes drafts of his poems in his letters, imbedded in the intellectual or emotional context that provoked their composition. In doing so, he locates the acts of reading and writing in the relational. While his poems are addressed to a general reading audience, within the letters they are also addressed to the individuals with whom Keats was closest, as though those relationships are a site for the creation of his poems. This is very different from contemporaries like Wordsworth and Shelley, who considered poetry a personal, solitary endeavor. The "I" of Wordsworth's poems is an autonomous individual who creates and shapes his poetic voice largely in isolation from others (often in nature). However, the "I" of Keats' poems is an embedded "I," demonstrating a connection and engagement with literary traditions and figures that is personal and relational. Keats shapes his identity as a poet within a network or community. For him, to be a great poet is

¹²⁹ Mellor, p. 215.

¹³⁰ Keats, *The Major Works*, p. 431.

to be “among the English poets,” to be personally engaged with Chapman’s Homer and the other “realms of gold” of the Western cannon.¹³¹ Keats places a heavy emphasis on the relational, which psychologists and autobiographical scholars consider a trademark of female psychological development and women’s writing.

In personality and ideology, then, Keats was effeminate. Adrienne Rich and Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi have both observed that Keats’ philosophy of negative capability is a distinctly feminine philosophy.¹³² Nancy Chodorow, a feminist psychologist who first observed that women tend to use a relational model of the self (unlike men, who often demonstrate an autonomous self model), also observed that women have so-called “weak” ego boundaries. That is, women are in general more empathetic than men and have a greater ability to imagine, identity with, and connect with the experiences of others. As Rich and Gelpi point out, the ability to empathize with the experiences of others is akin to Keats’ definition of negative capability. Keats would have considered the so-called “strong” ego boundaries of men a weakness in a poet, because it veers towards a dangerous solipsism. Keats’ recognition of the power and potency of negative capability, for Rich and Gelpi, advances a feminist argument. In his conviction that a poet should have no identity, Keats recognizes the power of having “weak” (we might also consider the word “flexible” or “elastic”) ego boundaries.¹³³

Importantly however, Keats does not attribute this power to women or to femininity. Instead, as Homans suggests, he appropriates it. In his February 19, 1819 letter to Reynolds, Keats lays out an argument for the acquisition of knowledge as a passive, feminine activity. He speaks of a spider spinning a web as an analogy for the mind forming a world-view by joining and threading the environment around it. “Almost any Man may like the Spider spin from his

¹³¹ Keats, Letter to George and Georgian Keats, 25 October 1818 and “On Looking Into Chapman’s Homer.”

¹³² Homans, 343.

¹³³ Ibid.

own inwards his own airy Citadel – the points of leaves and twigs on which the Spider begins her work are few and she fills the Air with a beautiful circuiting.”¹³⁴ Keats’ spider reimagines a more popular analogy of the acquisition of knowledge as a bee buzzing from flower to flower, taking sap from each. In Keats’ revision of this metaphor, he feminizes an epistemological philosophy, emphasizing the relational and the passive. To Reynolds he continues this critique:

It has been an old comparison for our urging on – the Bee hive – however it seems to me that we should rather be the flower than the Bee – for it is a false notion that more is gained by receiving than giving – no the receiver and the giver are equal in their benefits – The f[l]ower I doubt not receives a fair guerdon from the Bee – its leaves blush deeper in the next spring – and who shall say between Man and Woman which is the most delighted? Now it is more noble to sit like Jove [than] to fly like Mercury.¹³⁵

Keats argues for the power of a passive, receptive, and feminine epistemological approach. However, he also appropriates the feminine by reimagining the feminine as an alternative masculinity – a Jove to complement a Mercury. Keats recognizes the passive-active dichotomy he explores in this letter as a dichotomy between feminine and masculine, female and male (hence he asks Reynolds, “and who shall say between Man and Woman which is the most delighted?”), yet he chooses to reframe this dichotomy as one between two masculinities, between Jove’s stately and passive seat on his throne and Mercury’s active movement through the heavens. Keats shies away from taking what we would consider a feminist stance in order to defend his effeminate ideas as examples of a broader notion of masculinity. Thus Keats’ argument for the acquisition of knowledge is not feminine, it is a passive masculinity. Likewise his concept of negative capability is not the hallmark of the female writer and thinker, but of Shakespeare – not characteristic of the Poetess, but of the reimagined, pointedly male Poet.

We can best understand this choice of Keats’ as one provoked by an anxiety surrounding masculinity. His deepest insecurities – financial lack, infirmity, a weak constitution, an inability

¹³⁴ Keats, Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, 19 February 1818

¹³⁵ Ibid.

to master or even complete the “masculine” poetic form of epic, denial of the recognition as a proper poet – brought his virility and manhood under defense. Even if he saw poetic creation or wisdom as feminine processes, we can imagine Keats had an interest in maintaining the female as the ‘Other.’ Keats did not want to be read, critiqued, or criticized by women, Fanny included. He remained skeptical and even suspicious of women as readers, partly because of his inability to attract the commercially necessary female market, partly perhaps due to a sense of sexual inadequacy. As Homans argues, he transformed women into objects of beauty, “sweetmeats” to be regarded, adored, and possessed.¹³⁶ Following the Lacanian theory, Keats constructs women as an ‘Other’ onto which to project his own lack and thereby find himself complete. For female readers of Keats, this necessarily complicates our reading of him.

In question of scholarship critical of Keats’ views toward women, Heidi Thomson has turned toward Keats’ sympathetic relationships with the women of his life in her chapter “Fanny Brawne and Other Women” from the recently published *John Keats in Context*. Keats felt a particular fondness toward his maternal grandmother, Alice Jennings, with whom he lived from 1804-1814 following his father’s death and his mother’s disappearance. Her generous and good-willed nature Thomson speculates Keats recreated in the characters of his aged nurses (such as Angela in *The Eve of St. Agnes*). Beyond his grandmother Keats had very amicable relationships with the sisters and wives of his friends, including rather surprisingly the mother-in-law of his brother George. He also had much affection for his younger sister Fanny. When, following the death of their mother, Fanny was sent to live with a guardian who disapproved of regular meetings between the Keats siblings, Keats maintained a close and supportive relationship with her through letters. He even encouraged Fanny Brawne and Fanny Keats to form an acquaintance,

¹³⁶ Homans, 346.

out of a desire to see the two women he loved most on close terms.¹³⁷ Those who knew him best considered Keats a kind and empathetic friend. His relationships were intimate, cordial, and of especial value to him – traits that it is not surprising extended across gender boundaries.

Of course, what Thomson fails to address is that Keats could hold close and dear relationships with women and still (consciously or unconsciously) hold on to complicated, patriarchal or hegemonic ideas about women. The women who appear in Keats' poetry are far removed from the living womanhood of the women Keats knew in his own life. They are abstracted, romantic, and unquestionably poetic figures, existing on borders between supernatural and mortal, ideal and real, lovely and fatal. The 'Belle Dame' is as much a fantasy, an invented and recollected fragment of the male psyche, as a woman – mysterious and enigmatic, she is a question and an object of pursuit to both the knight and the reader. In the odes, Keats addresses feminine forms – the urn with her attic shape, an "unravish'd bride of quietness;" the nightingale, emblem of Philomel; Psyche, Indolence, and Melancholy all undoubtedly female subjects; and Autumn as well, described in Keats' letters as having "chaste weather – Dian skies."¹³⁸ In the odes, a male poet seeks a connection with a female object, attempting to understand, penetrate, and possess her elusive wisdom. We see a tension in the odes between connection and disunion. Although Keats' speaker claims to be "already with" the nightingale, the resolution of the poem is an othering between the speaker and the nightingale. While she flies on the speaker is brought "back from thee to my sole self," leaving him perplexed and ultimately barred from the nightingale's wisdom ("Was it a vision, or a waking dream?") In this othering, Keats loses access to a feminine realm that he suggests holds some knowledge of

¹³⁷ Heidi Thomson, 'Fanny Brawne and other women,' in *John Keats in Context*, ed. Michael O'Neill (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

¹³⁸ Keats, Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, 21 September 1819.

value to the poet. However, in losing this knowledge and remaining forever in pursuit of it, Keats gains a masculine poetic voice.

Idealizing Philomel: Non-Lingual Poetries and Keats' Crisis of Language

Looking at "Ode on a Grecian Urn," we return to the idea that Keats' odes each feature a male subject in pursuit of a female object of address. In the odes the male poet-speaker seeks to understand some knowledge he believes the object of address holds. He searches for a union with the feminized object, attempting to grasp, penetrate, and possess her knowledge, which is visible in how Keats fills "Ode on a Grecian Urn" with questions directed toward the urn. The first stanza overflows with them, as what starts as an address ("Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness") becomes a frenzied interrogation ("What men or gods are these? What maidens loth? / What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?"). In the last lines of this first stanza these recurring question marks seem interchangeable with exclamations, as the speaker demands to know the meaning of the scene depicted about the urn's body. His gaze is affected, critical, and insistent. We can imagine the speaker viewing the urn in the round, his curiosity and puzzlement growing as his eye moves around the urn's curved shape.

By virtue of its function and design, an urn is separated into an external body and an internal, not easily visible, hollow opening. An urn carries and contains; it is an object whose value rests both in its visual impression and in what it holds. Keats' speaker exercises a male gaze toward this feminine and passive object, apprehending, seeing and attempting to peer within what the urn presents to its viewer. Tension emerges for the speaker of "Grecian Urn" between that which he can observe and know about the urn and that which remains unseen to him, visible only within his mind's eye. For him, the urn has a visible externality that suggests but does not

reveal its invisible internality. Thus he can see the urn's sylvan motifs and "leaf-fringed legend" and the figures and instruments depicted on it, but he does not know the names of these figures or their narrative or symbolic context and meaning. Silence defines the urn. She is a "silent form" who makes no reply to the speaker's call for information. What the urn does communicate she communicates without language. Describing the urn as a "Sylvan historian," the speaker acknowledges that the urn records and communicates; however, she does so without words or verse, expressing her "flowery tale" not in the rhyme of the speaker but in physical pictures and unspoken signs.

Keats suggests that the urn is a poet, but one unlike like the poet of "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The urn's verse is silent, wordless, and non-lingual. If we acknowledge the speaker as the voice of the traditional male poet, the urn stands as a dissimilar and othered poet, a historian whose 'texts' cannot be read like the Classical histories of Virgil or Livy. Moreover, she is an idealized other, her silence achieving a more perfect music and verse than that of an audible, lingual song. "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter," the speaker comments, elevating the urn's music above that of an accessible and familiar song-form. So much of what we experience of the Grecian urn remains unseen or unheard – for example, we cannot hear the "soft pipes" that echo through the second stanza. In stanza 4 the speaker's imagined "little town by river or sea shore, / Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel" exists on the urn only in a silent suggestion concealed in the processional scene carved on the urn. Keats favors these unarticulated images of the urn's "Cold Pastoral" above articulated poetry. In stanza five he writes, "Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought." The unarticulated form of the urn has the power to prevent articulation, to disarticulate. The urn's silence is elevated above the speech

of the speaker, whose verse is less sweet and, as Keats also suggests, inferior to the enigmatic and clandestine way the urn imparts meaning.

In “Ode to a Nightingale” we see similar dynamics at work between a male poet-speaker and an othered female poet-object. In keeping with the form of the odes, “Ode to a Nightingale” presents a male speaker and a feminine object of address. Unlike in the other odes, however, the nightingale is not in itself an abstract entity. While Melancholy, Indolence, Psyche, and Autumn are intrinsically elevated ideas gendered and personified in a poetic context, and Keats’ Grecian urn is a symbolic, notional, and inanimate form, the nightingale is a commonplace being, a recognizable creature of the physical world. This makes the nightingale as an object of address more accessible to a poet-speaker. Greater tension and critical ambiguity emerges in “Ode to a Nightingale,” then, because of the nightingale’s complexity as an object of address. On one level, the nightingale’s significance is personal and literal. Yet as in the other odes, Keats’ object of address takes on a larger, abstracted identity.

What we know of the context of Keats’ composition of “Ode to a Nightingale” comes from Brown’s record in his *Life of John Keats*, written seventeen years after “Nightingale.” Brown recalls that in the spring of 1819 a nightingale had built its nest in the gardens outside Wentworth Place. He writes:

Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song; and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast-table to the grass plot under the plum-tree, where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house, I perceived he had some scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind the books. On inquiry, I found those scraps of paper, four or five in number, contained his poetic feeling on the song of our nightingale.¹³⁹

With editorial help from Brown, these scraps of paper became the manuscript of “Ode to a Nightingale,” a poem containing two primary figures of importance – the poet beneath the plum-

¹³⁹ Charles Brown, *Life of Keats* (Oxford University Press, 1937).

tree and the solitary nightingale, the subject and his object of inspiration and address. Brown's biographical entry allows us to read the poem on the level of the personal and literal. Keats speaks in "Ode to a Nightingale" as himself, the living poet, to a living nightingale. Yet on a symbolic level, Keats becomes the generalized and abstracted poetic "I" of his odes, and, critically, his nightingale – the real bird we know to have nested in the spring of 1819 near a plum-tree in a Hampstead garden – apotheosizes into a symbolic bird. The song of "our nightingale," as Brown affectionately refers to her, transcends the realm of mortal birdsong to represent an immortal song "heard in ancient days" just as Keats heard it on a spring morning one day in 1819.

The nightingale of "Ode to a Nightingale" is thus both a common nightingale and an iteration of the nightingale as an abstracted symbol for poetry and poetic inspiration. The nightingale's song transfixes the poet-speaker, transporting him to an imaginative realm. Keats illustrates a stark contrast between the world in which his speaker lives – the world beneath the garden plum-tree – and the imaginative and idealized world in which the speaker believes the nightingale exists. "Here," as the speaker attests in the third stanza, is a place of sorrow, pain, and mortality, a world in which "youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies / Where but to think is to be full of sorrow / And leaden-eyed despairs." The human world of the speaker is a place associated with trauma, removed from the abstracted and immortal realm of the nightingale. Keats' speaker supposes with some conviction that the nightingale in its place among the trees "hast never known" the sorrows of the mortal world that he describes. In proclaiming, "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!" he speaks not to a living songbird, but to a notional and symbolic songbird, one who flutters in a landscape seen in the speaker's mind's eye, but not in his corporeal eye. While the personal context of the ode brings the

nightingale into closer proximity with Keats and his speaker – as physically the nightingale is of the world of the poet, a shared inhabitant of the garden at Wentworth – Keats disrupts this point of union in the poem. He presents the nightingale as inaccessible, otherworldly, and othered. Just as in “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” where the male speaker experiences a frustration between the visible, accessible externality of the urn and its invisible, unknowable internality, the nightingale frustrates the speaker of its ode by being both familiar and removed, heard but unattainable. As the speaker of “Grecian Urn” seeks to know and understand those parts of the urn that he cannot, the speaker of “Nightingale” feels himself in pursuit of the nightingale he cannot grasp. He imagines himself located in a “here” and herself located in an “away,” wishing he could bring himself into her “away,” but finding himself unable to fully reach her. Her song is heard but then fades, her imagined setting suggested and provoked by the landscape of Wentworth garden, but ultimately unseen.

This dichotomy between the speaker’s reality and that of the nightingale – between a mortal world within our proximity and an immortal imaginary landscape of indeterminate proximity – also stands in for a dichotomy between the poetry we can access and the poetry we perhaps cannot. Keats’ nightingale acts a muse. She is an object of inhuman beauty and inspiration, as well as a poet and creator in her own right. Keats describes the mythic “Poesy” in stanza four as a “viewless” and winged creature, if not an image of the nightingale then certainly one that calls her to mind. In flying to the nightingale, Keats’ speaker must fly on the wings of Poesy, a journey that leads him to a landscape drawn from the literary imagination. The poetry of the nightingale transports the speaker to a fictive and unseen bower, whose “fruit-tree wild,” “pastoral eglantine,” and “coming musk-rose,” echo the bank described by Oberon in Act II scene 1 of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Keats takes the flowers of the third stanza not from a

real English garden so much as a poetic Shakespearian one, connecting the nightingale and her landscape not to a literary environment. Poetry holds substantial power in “Ode to a Nightingale.” The perfect poetry of the nightingale makes her an eternal creature of beauty, one capable of flying across time and space and outside of the mortality that weights and pains the speaker. Poetry also grants the speaker the temporary ability to travel and experience, if only in his mind’s eye, the ideal realm to which the nightingale belongs. Yet his poetry ultimately fails to transport the speaker “away” from his reality. In the final stanza, he calls his imaginative and literary journey through the poem a “fancy,” and a “deceiving elf.” The “plaintive anthem” that fades out as the poem closes, the music that provokes the speaker’s disoriented final questions, is the speaker’s experience of hearing the nightingale’s song. As the immortal bird flies on, her ideal poetry is preserved out of range of the speaker’s ear.

Within “Ode to Nightingale” then, Keats explores a discrepancy between an ideal conception of poetry and an imperfect, insufficient lingual poetry. The wordless song of the nightingale holds a beauty and capacity the speaker struggles to attain. His anthem ends in disarticulation, dissipating in circular questions that pose serious epistemological problems and leave the speaker in the unresolved melancholy of the original stanza. As in “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” the feminized object of address holds a wisdom that escapes the speaker’s reach and understanding because she does not speak in the imperfect language of the speaker. Rather, the urn’s silent form presents unheard songs, unseen landscapes, and pictorial rather than lingual images. Likewise the nightingale sings an immortal song that lacks words. Her voice is tongueless in that it does not speak the language of the human tongue.

It is in this quality that Keats’ nightingale suggests the myth of Philomel. Philomel loses her tongue and transfigures into a nightingale, allowing her to regain a voice but never again the

lingua, the language and the tongue, that she lost. In the myth when Tereus denies Philomela access to lingual speech she has to seek out a non-lingual form of speech, the feminine speech of the loom, to communicate and to recount her story. Lingual speech – the language of our literary tradition and the form used by the male poet-speaker – fails her. Divorced from her tongue, she takes on the form of speech of the feminine ‘Other,’ weaving her story into a tapestry for Procne to ‘read.’ The marks Philomela makes with her loom offer an alternative to the lingual marks of a literary text. As discussed, they speak with a disarticulated voice. Similarly, once Philomela transfigures into a bird, her non-lingual song offers an alternative to the song-form we know in verse. Ovid’s narrative creates a tension between the imperfect and vulnerable *lingua* and a more perfect, other language. Procne can comprehend and interpret the meaning of Philomela’s tapestry without fault, the alternative, non-lingual *texta*, *textum* bringing the sisters into a union that usurps and ultimately brings down the more traditionally powerful relationships in the narrative between husband and wife and parent and child. As in “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” where Keats idealizes an alternative, silent or tongueless form of speech, in the myth of Philomel a tongueless speech is more perfect and more potent. Reading Keats’ nightingale in conversation with Ovid’s tongueless nightingale, Keats’ bird becomes a symbol for an other, non-lingual, and superlative poetry than that of the poet-speaker. In her tonguelessness she is able to do that of which Keats’ speaker and Keats himself feel they are incapable, singing in “full-throated ease.”

Universalizing Philomel: the Meaning of Ravishing in Keats

On a day in March of 1817 John Keats visited the British Museum with his friend, Benjamin Haydon, to see the recently acquired Elgin Marbles. Haydon, an artist, firmly believed in the aesthetic importance of the Marbles and had campaigned for the British government to buy

the sculptures from Lord Elgin. Keats' visit with Haydon to the Museum provoked him to write two sonnets that day on the subject of the Marbles. Two years later, Keats would compose another ekphrastic poem inspired by his experiences of the British Museum and of the Elgin Marbles and other Hellenic antiquities contained therein, this time an ode to a notional and fictive 'Grecian Urn.' Keats' ode incorporates elements from a variety of antique and Hellenic art-objects, broadly considering the form and aesthetic of Greek urns and other antiquities and the thematic questions they provoke for a contemporary viewer about temporality and mortality.

Ekphrastic poems inspired by Classical antiquities were common during Keats' time. In 1806 Oxford gave a prize for a poem written on a 'Study of the Remains of Ancient Grecian and Roman Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting.' In the period from 1810-1820, the prize called for poems written on particular popular Classical works, including The Parthenon, The Pantheon, The Belvidere Apollo, and the famous 'Dying Gaul' sculpture (also known then as 'The Dying Gladiator'). Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1820), then, fits a contemporary ekphrastic trend. What makes Keats' poem unusual, however, is his representation of a notional, rather than an actual known, art-object. Keats would have seen a variety of Grecian urns both in the British museum and in engravings within books on antiquities. In his personal library, Keats owned a copy of Potter's *Antiquities of Greece* (1775), which contained engravings of Greek urns. He likely also read Kirk's *Outlines from the Figures and Compositions upon Greek, Roman, and Etruscan Vases of the late Sir William Hamilton; with Engraved Borders* (1814), a possible source for the "leaf-fringed" borders of his Grecian urn.

Rather than writing on a specific urn, Keats borrows and incorporates elements from various Greek urns and antiquities he saw into his ode. The Townley Vase, a large neo-Attic marble vase acquired by the British Museum in 1805, bears a resemblance to Keats' urn in the

chase iconography depicted upon it. On the Townley Vase, male figures pursue Classical maidens, whose fluid garments suggest the movement of their flight. The vase captures these figures in motion, with the ball of one foot brushing against the frieze's bottom border as the other leg hinges in the air in mid-stride. The effect echoes that of the stilled pursuit of Keats' urn. The Sosibios Vase and the Borghese Vase are two other possible influences for Keats' urn. Both are within the Louvre's collection, but would have been accessible to Keats through engravings, and one – the Sosibios Vase – appears in Keats' papers as the subject of an illustration he made. Like the Townley Vase, both are large marble neo-Attic urns meant for a decorative or ceremonial (rather than functional) purpose. On their friezes they depict lovers and musicians like the figures mentioned in Keats' ode. The Borghese Vase features a Bacchic piper beside a young couple – a male lover yanking a maiden closer toward him by her garments.¹⁴⁰

For the inspiration of the sacrificial processional of strophe four, Keats drew from an even wider array of artistic sources. While vases like the Sosibios and Borghese vases include possible iconographic schemes of religious ceremonies or processions, Ian Jack argues a more likely source for this strophe of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' was the paintings of French Baroque artist Claude Lorrain, with which Keats would have had considerable familiarity. Claude's 'Landscape with the Father of Psyche sacrificing at the Milesian Temple of Apollo' (1662) and his 'Landscape with Bacchus at the Palace of the dead Staphylus' (mid 17th century) show processional figures engaged in a religious sacrificial ceremony. In these landscapes Hellenic worshippers gather in the foreground toward a temple, some leading livestock with them to be sacrificed. In an illustration of Claude's, 'View of Delphi with a Procession' (mid 17th century), a similar processional makes its way toward a town. Towering above we see a mountain crowned

¹⁴⁰ Ian Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art* (Oxford University Press, 1967), 215-19.

by a citadel, recalling the town “mountain-built with peaceful citadel” Keats evokes in line 36 of ‘Grecian Urn.’ Meanwhile, the “heifer lowing at the skies, / And all her silken flanks with garlands drest” presented in lines 31-32, strongly parallels the posture of the garlanded cow from the Elgin Marble’s south frieze, an image that, given the popularity of the Marbles at the time of their 1816 acquisition, both Keats and his contemporary readers would have recognized.¹⁴¹ In this fragmented portion of the south frieze, several herdsmen lead a cow toward an unknown destination. The cow’s neck arches upward as she lifts her head in the manner of cattle lowing. In this way, this particular moment caught within the Parthenon frieze seems to stretch outside of the boundaries of time, recalling a universal and timeless motion. This cow carved in marble low-relief mirrors both antique and contemporary animals. In referring to a real life natural parallel, the art-object engages itself both backward and forward in time. To an eighteenth century visitor of the British museum, this portion of the Parthenon sculptures would appear familiar, an antique element seemingly plucked from his own countryside that converges past with present. Keats’ lowing heifer achieves a similar effect in his ode, situating a timeless motion and sound within a silent and unknown antique context.

The varied nature of the artistic sources of inspiration for Keats’ Grecian urn contribute toward the urn’s status as a notional art-object, a symbolic representation that invokes not one particular Greek urn or antiquity, but Hellenic antiquities as a whole. Keats addresses a generalized class of art-objects. He writes not as a visitor to one particular display case of the British Museum, but as an observer who has had the experience of walking through the British Museum’s galleries, a reader who has browsed through engravings of a book of antiquities, and, importantly, a poet who has seen these works and fragments from his own creative perspective.

¹⁴¹ Jack, 219-23.

In writing on the notional Grecian urn, Keats asks his reader to consider urns as a category of objects. In his ode, he emphasizes that by nature an urn is a hollow object. Its body consists of pronounced and ornamented curves that delineate and surround an opening. In function an urn carries and contains, its value located in the negative space it encloses. Artistically, the Greek urn features a self-contained frieze that endlessly circles and encompasses a vacant space. While architectural friezes – like those of the Parthenon – fit the geometric space of a temple’s walls or its triangular pediment, the smaller-scale frieze of a Greek vase encloses itself within and about an organic, rounded dimension, its figures curving up the lines of the urn as well as around its orbed circumference. These qualities lend the Greek urn a feminine persona. Like the female body, the urn is an object capable of being penetrated and filled, one whose figure becomes aestheticized by a (presumably male) gaze. In “Ode on a Grecian Urn” Keats not only permits this gendering, but assumes it, first addressing the urn as an “unravish’d bride of quietness.” Therefore, the primary characteristic of the Grecian urn, that quality Keats chooses to present first, is its distinctly feminine vulnerability to ravishing, the susceptible hollowness at the center of its existence.

The scenes depicted on the urn further engage with the conversation the urn’s form provokes. The theme of pursuit emerges in the first strophe, in Keats’ initial address to the urn as an “unravish’d bride,” and in the last lines of the strophe, in which the speaker indicates in his questions that a “mad pursuit” is the primary subject of the urn’s iconography. On the frieze, male figures (the “men or gods” of line 8) chase maidens in a woodland setting, depicting the Ovidian romantic chase of *Metamorphoses*’ divine *amor* narratives. The “struggle to escape” the speaker mentions in line 9 refers back to the maiden objects of pursuit. Thus Keats presents us with an art-object engaged in the depiction of pursuers and the pursued. The narrative of the

urn's figures suggests the circular shape of the urn itself, whose form dictates that its figures chase and flee each other in perpetuity as the frieze is viewed in the round. A chase endlessly unfolds on the urn, both because the urn displays a static snapshot of a romantic chase, and because its figures infinitely chase each other around the urn's circumference.

Similarly, the sacrificial procession Keats describes in the fourth strophe reinforces the urn's hollow form. Like all the scenes on the urn, the procession circles the hollow space of the urn. Its rounded progression of figures suggests the vacancy of its center. Moreover, however, the iconography of the procession additionally evokes vacancy by implying a vacancy within its narrative program. Keats illustrates the scene for his reader, describing its "green altar," "mysterious priest," and "heifer...with garlands drest." Yet the most memorable and lingering image of this strophe is not that of the scene depicted on the urn, but an imagined scene intimated by the urn. Keats' speaker on looking at the figures of the ceremony imagines a "little town by river or sea shore, / Or mountain built with peaceful citadel...emptied of this folk, this pious morn." As the urn's self-enclosed frieze suggests the empty space bound within it, so the processional scene suggests an empty scene, a space consequently made vacant by the occupied space of the processional. Furthermore, the static nature of the urn means that this town stands empty not just on "this pious morn," but "evermore." The urn arrests the temporality of the narratives represented on it, forcing each day that the urn exists in its unchanging form to be the pious morn of the town's vacancy. This "desolate" town reiterates the central characteristics of the urn to its viewer – empty, stilled, enigmatic, silent. Like the urn it stands in our mind's eye as still unravished, a negative space preserved in the speaker's imagination.

The oppositional balance between positive and negative images – between that which is there and that which consequently is not – emerges as a key element of the Grecian urn. Inside

the British Museum, Keats would have seen not just large marble urns like the Townley Vase, but dozens of the more common black and red figure Attic urns, objects whose decorative scheme depends upon the simple dichotomous relationship between positive and negative. To create a red figure Attic vase, the artist had to apply paint around the contours of the figures he wished to depict, shaping scenes through the creation of their negative. The lines and shapes of the black paint direct the eye to the negative, unpainted figures left in red. Each one of these pieces of pottery conjures a twinned visual image, that of the positive and the emerging negative. Just as the positive image of the Grecian urn's sacrificial procession suggests the unseen negative of the emptied town, the black positive image suggests its counterpart red image. In a similar way, the urn's positive physicality suggests its negative internality, and a positive marble relief suggests the negative removed from the original stone block. Among the rooms of the British Museum where the fragments of the Parthenon Sculptures stand, for every positive fragment seen by the viewer a missing negative fragment appears to his mind's eye. A figure's concrete torso suggests its imagined, absent limbs, likewise a foot or arm speaks not only to its own form, but to the form of its missing match.

We can extend this formal artistic element – the suggestion of the negative image in the positive – to the themes Keats considers in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn.' If, when the urn presents a positive image to its viewer it also implies its converse negative, then we can read a suggestion of movement in the urn's stillness, a suggestion of ravishing in its unravished body, and a suggestion of mortality in its immortality. For Keats, the Grecian Urn ultimately serves as a *momento mori*, a reminder of mortality. The lithic strength and permanence of the urn's marble form speaks not only of its strength and permanence, but perhaps more loudly of those things that are fragile and impermanent. In being a "foster-child of silence and slow time," it brings its

viewer and reader back to a consideration of time. The urn is a negative image that suggests its positive, its immortality emphasizing the mortality of the people who created and used it.

Hanging about its attic shape and “cold pastoral” is the unheard, unseen, suggestion of the once warm and living hand that sculpted it and the panting and sighing of real maidens who did fade, grow un-fair, and die.

In the processional scene, we imagine a feast day, some sort of celebration or parade of garlanded bounty. The green altar suggests abundance and the climax of growth. Its color complements the image of the “leaf-fring’d legends” and happy boughs. Yet at whose expense does this happiness and celebration come? The young heifer is perhaps the most “still unravish’d” figure of the poem. When we imagine the sounds of the urn, Keats gives us the melodies of the unheard “soft pipes,” but there is another unheard sound within the poem and that is the lowing of the heifer, a hollow, pained noise that emerges in contrast with the pipes and timbrels and joyous procession, bringing us back to the theme of the Ovidian romantic chase. In “Ode on a Grecian Urn” we are always stilled in the process of approaching something, arguably stilled in the process of approaching a ravishing. The men and gods chase after maidens in a “mad pursuit,” the lover wins near the goal of his own maiden, and the priest leads the heifer towards the sacrificial altar. A capture, a killing, and a deflowering are just within reach.

There is a hollowness – a negativity – in the image of the urn and in the images upon it. “Unravish’d bride of quietness” and “foster-child of silence and slow time” speak of a stilled, nearly deadened object, one caught perpetually in anticipation of an action, but never arriving there. Like Daphne, the urn is never quite ravished. Instead it stands forever waiting to be filled. Keats’ urn manages to capture and arrest the moment of Ovidian metamorphosis when Daphne’s transformation into a tree forever prevents and simultaneously also prolongs, her ravishing. The

urn, taken from the historic, now-lost context that gave it its original meaning, is disinherited and displaced not only from its own time, but also from the natural progression of time. We could think about the implied ravishing of “Ode on a Grecian Urn” as a metaphor for the nature of time, a nod back to the natural progression towards mortality inherent in time. As Keats stood before the art objects in the British Museum, he existed in a world in which time ultimately ravishes, in which youth “grows pale and spectre-thin and dies” to borrow the language of “Ode to a Nightingale.” We could think of living as a continual ravishing, and to pause as the heifer is forced to – stopped on its march towards an eventual death – does not remove death. Indeed, the altar still stands up ahead of the procession as a concrete, fixed, and unavoidable point. Though arrested, the priest still engages in the act of leading the heifer towards the altar. Time and its progression still exist; the urn is only stopped forever at a point along that progression. If in “Grecian Urn” Keats sought to find an answer to the problem of mortality posed by “Nightingale,” he fails to do so. The lithic truth that takes shape in this poem is not Beauty, as the final strophe could indicate, but the transience of the non-lithic world and those figures not carved in marble.

Turning again to “Ode to a Nightingale,” in Keats’ assertion that the nightingale “hast never know” the pains of human ills and human mortality there is a faint suggestion of Philomel – not Philomel the nightingale, but Philomel the human woman. When Philomel flies out of the Thracian castle and into the woods she morphs, transcends, into a mythic bird. Through this metamorphosis she is elevated (literally taking wing), finally escaping from Tereus’ threat of violence. Through metamorphosis, she finds the rescue that did not come for her in the woods. Before this metamorphosis, however, she was a human woman who experienced “the weariness, the fever, and the fret” of which Keats speaks – separated from her sister, stolen from her

homeland, abducted, raped, and mutilated by the man charged with protecting her, held captive in the woods, and then, upon rescue, involved in a bloody revenge plot. Just before her metamorphosis Philomel appears in the banquet hall, drenched in blood, still tongueless, holding the severed head of Itys. The same theme present in Ovid's telling of the tale – the magnitude of the suffering that men are capable of both inflicting and experiencing – has a strong echo in Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" (and in so much of his writing). In *Metamorphoses* we see a divide between the earlier elegiac tales of divine *amor* and the darker, un-elevated, baser stories of men and women that commences with and is marked by the story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela. In "Ode to a Nightingale," there is a similar divide between the beauty and romance of the world of 'Poesy' and the un-poetic, un-elevated tragedy of human experience.

In Keats' ode there is an ideal mythic realm where the figures of poetry live out their apotheosized, literary immortality. The melancholy of Keats' speaker stems from his inability to access that realm with permanence. Keats' speaker wishes to transcend the cruel reality of his human world, to fly away like Philomel does at the end of her tragedy into poetic metamorphosis. She grows wings and flies back to the woods – the former site of so much violence and pain – but this time much has changed. Keats' nightingale delivers us to a forest that is not *obscura* but "embalmed in darkness." Lyricized, aestheticized, the woods of Philomel-as-nightingale spring from the most poetic of Shakespearean passages. Through metamorphosis Philomel ascends out of horror and affliction and into Verse. Meanwhile the ravishing she experienced in her former *corpora* becomes the universal, taken on by Keats' speaker as an emblem of the pain and mortality of ungendered human experience.

For the feminist, this might be the simplest but most troubling legacy of Philomela. This is what Joplin calls "the primary evasion" – that Philomela has become universal "before she

has been met as female.”¹⁴² From Sophocles and Ovid through Shakespeare and to Keats, we have seen Philomela as a representation of (in a unexhausted list of no particular order): Athenian politics; the anxieties of the Greek patriarch; the danger of extreme revenge; the threat of sororal fidelity; women’s speech; weaving; *mêtis*; the sisterhood of the loom; *texta*, texts; castration anxiety; penis envy; women as signs of exchange; violence embedded in marriage and/or ritual; boundary collapse between rape and marriage; disorder; the Shakespearean green world; metamorphosis; divine *amor, in nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas corpora*; language; the failure of language; disarticulation; nightingales; swallows; poems; poets; Poetry; Poesy; the Muse; spontaneous creativity; inspiration from the natural world; non-lingual poetry, ideal poetry, immortal poetry; immortality; mortality; human barbarity; human pain; human experience...

But in this study of the canon of Classical and English verse we have yet to see Philomela represented as what she most fundamentally is – a woman who experiences sexual violence.

¹⁴² Joplin, p. 263

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